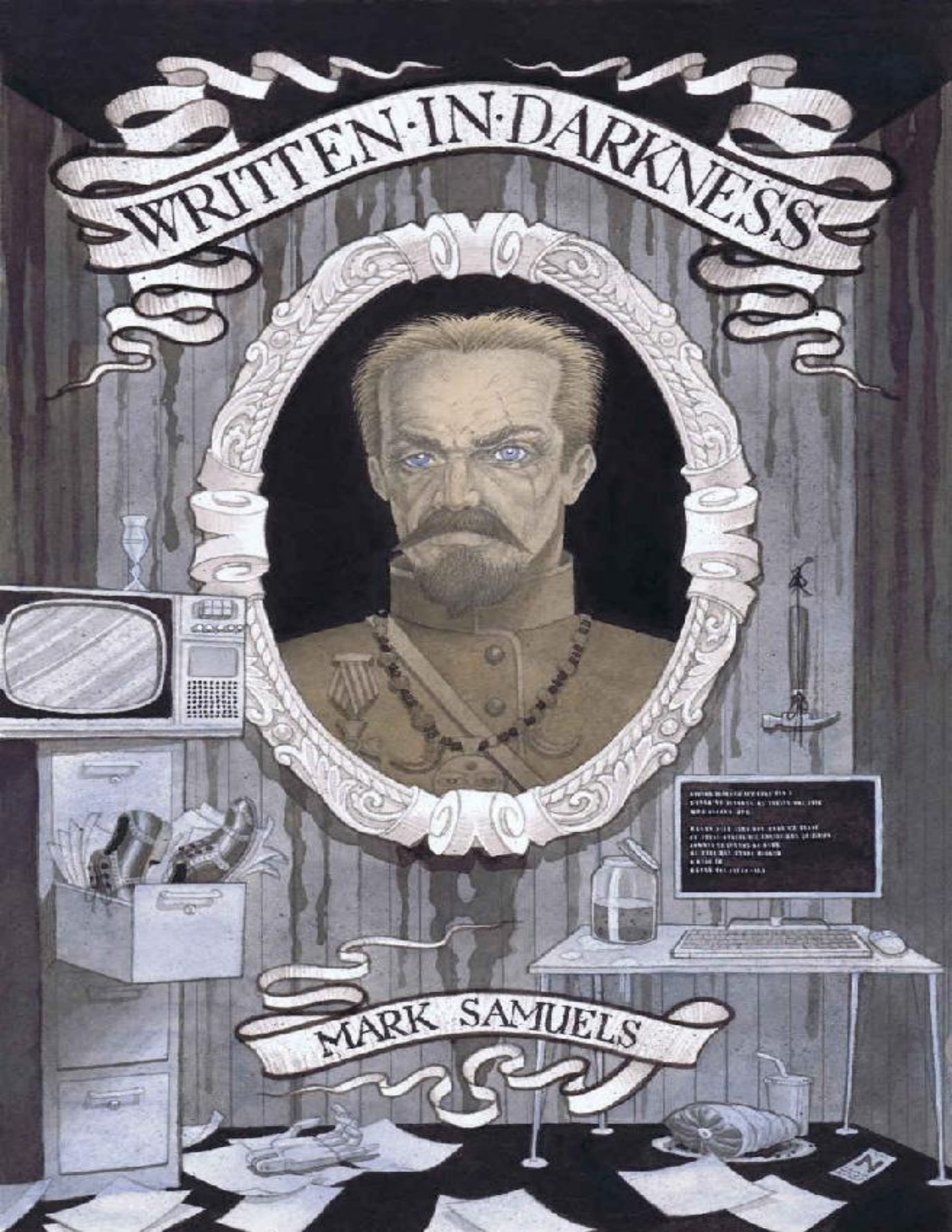
WRITTEN·IN·DARKNESS
MARK SAMUELS

Written in Darkness

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by Mark Samuels

Chômu Press

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To Daniel Corrick and Quentin S. Crisp

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Written in Darkness by Mark Samuels, an introduction

When you come out of an exhibition by a great artist such as Van Gogh, or Rembrandt or Turner, you seem for a while to be seeing the world through their eyes. Colours are unexpectedly vibrant; the faces of passers-by are imbued with a strange profundity. It is the same with some books. All writers worthy of the name present you with a world, or rather a vision of one, that lingers in the mind. The power of that vision is not dependent on whether you find it sympathetic, but on the imaginative skill of the artist and the depth of their intellect. Many successful authors avoid such idiosyncrasy and rely on comforting cliché and received opinion. They have their day and are forgotten, but the ones who last are those who see things as no one before or since has done. Mark Samuels is one of these.

Yes, you can detect echoes of Lovecraft and Ramsey Campbell, though not, happily, their peculiar way with an English sentence. A fellow feeling with Thomas Ligotti is present, but this is a case of coincidental sympathy rather than imitation. Borges, Machen, Beckett and Kafka might have been grandparents or great uncles, of the kind who give rich presents but are only occasionally seen. Samuels is decidedly himself, an uncompromising metaphysician with a mystical bent. It has surprised some people, though not me, to find that he is a man of religious faith. There is not a whisper of proselytism or facile pietism in his writing, but there is that capacity to stare without self-pity or recoiling into the abyss. It is a faculty that is characteristic of masters of the *via negativa* such as St John of the Cross. He tells what he sees, not what he (or we) would like to see.

I first came across Mark Samuels' work when I read and reviewed his first collection of stories *The White Hands* (Tartarus 2003). The vision, the characteristic themes, the piercing intellectual insight, the pessimism tempered by a profound humanity were all there. Only the prose lacked the refinement it has since acquired. Subsequently he has steadily produced a coherent and excellent body of work that includes a short novel, *The Face of Twilight*, and several collections including, up till this point, his finest work, *The Man Who Collected Machen*.

This present volume, *Written in Darkness*, represents the quintessential statement of Samuelsism. “I believe that mental isolation is the essence of weird fiction,” he wrote in *The White Hands*, and the isolation of the individual in society is still a major preoccupation, coupled with a singularly vivid understanding of the elusiveness of human identity. This last notion is at the roots of some of the greatest “horror” fiction of the past—see *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* etc.—but it is being tackled today, not least by Mark Samuels, with equal if not greater imaginative insight. Perhaps it is because in the so-called “global” world we are losing our old sense of national and familial identity. The identities we are adopting are impersonal and bewildering to us. We are becoming what we do not want to become.

That is a theme in some of Samuels’ most arresting tales. In “My World Has No Memories” a man finds himself at sea, isolated, and beginning to undergo a frightful sea-change. In “The Other Tenant” Samuels revisits one of his most successful early stories, “Apartment 205”, about a man unwillingly drawn to the hideous “life” of a flat adjacent to him, but it is far from being a mere repetition of the earlier tale. The eponymous hero of “Alistair” is discovering his own sinister identity. “A Call to Greatness” is a kind of *Heart of Darkness* set in the frozen wastes of Siberia and also involves a possible transference of identity, all the more fearful for being so ambiguous.

These transformations often relate to the workplace—an area at once alienating and anxious to draw you into its steely bosom. In “An Hourglass of the Soul” and “Outside Interference”, employees of large, faceless corporations find themselves forced into new and terrible existences through their work. The worst is that, in the end, they seem to accept their fate. Perhaps even to a greater extent than Thomas Ligotti, Samuels is the poet and prophet of modern technological dehumanisation.

It would be wrong, though, to assume that these interlocking themes are treated monotonously. On the contrary, each of these stories generates its own unique atmosphere of grim beauty: foreign cities, Siberian wastes, tumultuous seas, desert places and the environs of Hampstead and Highgate in North London are some of the settings. The latter’s haunting atmospheres have been an inspiration to many fine works of fiction, notably nearly all the later novels of the writer Stella Gibbons, and Samuels is now added to their number.

I do not find Samuels' work in any sense lowering. The intense horror of his stories has the exhilaration of a warning rather than the unmitigated gloom of a prediction. Without ever explicitly saying so, Samuels reminds us of the precious importance of human individuality and relationships, of, in short, the human soul. In his humanity he rages against inhumanity. That is why Samuels is one of the most significant and exciting voices in modern horror.

Mark is an artist. His work has a passionate intensity and integrity. His vision can be bleak, but it is realised with a kind of grandeur that makes it inspiring. You emerge from it, as you emerge from Dante's *Inferno,* purged by pity and terror, and strangely uplifted.

REGGIE OLIVER, August 2014

A Call to Greatness

> “We have most of us known some Masters of the Higher Wisdom, some pilgrims upon the path to power, some eastern esoteric saints and seers, who had really nothing to do with ethics. Something different, something detached and irresponsible, tinges the moral atmosphere . . . of the genuine and ancient cults of Asia. Deeper than the depths of metaphysics, far down in the abysses of mystical meditations, under all that solemn universe of spiritual things, is a secret, an intangible and terrible levity. It does not really very much matter what one does.”
>
> G.K. Chesterton

> “10. In the course of the struggle against the criminals who have destroyed and profaned Russia, it must be remembered that, on account of the complete depravation of morals and the absolute licentiousness, intellectual and physical, which now prevail in Russia, it is not possible to retain our old standard of values. ‘Truth and mercy’ are no longer admissible. Henceforth, there can only be ‘Truth and merciless hardness’. The evil which has fallen upon the land, with the object of destroying the divine principle in the human soul, must be extirpated root and branch. Fury against the heads of the revolution, and its devoted followers, must know no boundaries.”
>
> From Order No. 15, Baron Maximilian.

The man had finished the bottle of Bordeaux and gazed at the stained bottom of his glass. Half a dozen cigarettes had dulled his palate. The taste was bitter on his tongue and his mouth was dry. He was alone at the table outside a little café high up in the winding streets around Montmartre, beneath the white domes of Sacré-Cœur. Scattered across the check tablecloth in front of him were a series of age-yellowed papers. The empty bottle and the full ashtray secured the items against the light evening breeze that occasionally caused their edges to rustle.

He called out for the garçon, who brought another bottle and, noting the cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth, provided a light. The garçon cupped his hand around the flame from a match. He left the little box containing the other matches on the table, removed the cork from the fresh bottle, poured it out into a fresh glass and then silently retreated back into the deserted café.

The man was sick of his job in the European Chamber of Commerce, despite the wealth he had accumulated. He felt himself to be a good European but had become disillusioned with the occupational venality that had come to infect his soul. He had a fine apartment in Paris, a townhouse in Marseille and owned two properties in Germany that housed his mother and his cousin, and, moreover, his portfolio boasted many lucrative returns on his investments. He wanted for nothing materially.

The late afternoon shadows were lengthening and it felt more like autumn than spring. No blossom yet raged in a riot of colour on the barren trees and the chill in the air took a firmer hold as the sun dipped behind the rooftops.

The European dream was dead, he thought, the Europe of grand ideals was buried in the ashes of apathy. There was no brotherhood of nations, only the squalid struggle of the political and financial masters to line their own pockets, while the masses were brainwashed into a zombie-like existence under the false flag of liberty. All its values were secular and materialistic—with propagandistic jargon employed to nullify citizens from detecting the corrosion of their souls. Once Europe had professed itself to be the embodiment of a spiritual ideal. But, like a fossil, all that remained of it now was its hollow shell, the insides having rotted away during the passage of centuries.

A shudder ran through the frame of the man, whose name was Hilaire Egremont, as he continued contemplating the items on the table, which he had been doing for the last hour and a half. He was in his thirties, of above medium height, slim and with a fine head of jet-black hair. His wealth displayed itself in his beautifully manicured fingernails, highly polished black shoes and his expensive Italian suit. The end of a silk handkerchief of vivid yellow matched the tie knotted around his shirt collar. He was, in appearance, every inch a self-assured Parisian.

Distracted by the papers laid out before him, Egremont did not notice as a pale-faced man clad in an army greatcoat with the collar turned

up suddenly emerged from the late afternoon shadows and approached his table. Egremont did not even look up when the stranger, silent as a bird of prey, slipped into the seat opposite him. It was only when the person produced a single cough by way of drawing attention to his presence that Egremont's reveries were broken.

"You have received my parcel I see," said the stranger. There was something uncomfortably intense about his eyes. They were a pale shade of blue and were set beneath a lofty forehead. In their expression there seemed to lurk the potential for violence.

"Ah, you have gone to a great deal of trouble," Egremont replied, "but I am at a loss as to why you requested this meeting."

"Are you not interested in destiny?"

"Who are you?"

"My name is not important."

Egremont ground his finished cigarette into the ashtray.

"Look around you," the stranger said. "Can't you see that we are living amongst the ruins of our civilisation?"

The words seemed to chime in with the deliberations already in Egremont's mind, and he thought again of the disillusionment he felt over his own time spent in the corridors of power in the European Union. What good had come out of the project? A series of once great cities Americanised out of all recognition, streets thronged with homogenised consumerist outlets, a gulf between cultural and historical identity, blatant social engineering, obscenely wealthy masters of state and private enterprises, a celebrity-obsessed media, intellectual debates reduced to sound bites, a collective attention span that diminished year on year, aged people with plastic faces worshipping youth and an intelligentsia committed only to the self-destructive cause of fashionable cynicism.

"One man foresaw this would come to pass," the stranger said.

He jabbed a finger down on one of the series of documents upon the table.

"A contemporary account from 1921," he said. "It will suffice."

Egremont's gaze fixed on the papers in question. They read as follows . . .

*

Entries from the "Confessions of a Reporter in Eurasia" 1921.

We had been travelling for days on two reindeers and, at the last, my guide refused to take me any closer to my destination. He baulked at the roubles I offered him, and merely laughed uproariously when my other hand drew out an ice-cold pistol from the pocket of my greatcoat. He pointed over towards the other side of the ridge directly ahead of us and said that a further two-hour trek would bring me to the nobleman I sought. For his part, he dreaded the Baron more than he loved money or feared death. Saying no more, he turned his mount around and headed back the way we had come, into the murk of the deepening twilight. I watched him go, his form disappearing into the shadows creeping across the Russian steppe as the clouds passed in front of the moon.

For the first time in hours I had begun to take in my surroundings, having been, until then, subject to travel weariness and the copious amounts of neat vodka I'd consumed to ward off the effects of the thin sub-zero air on my city-coddled frame. Stark black trees jutted out of the snow like vertical cracks. What patches of earth were laid bare were also frozen solid. Scattered clumps of sharp rock pushed up from the surface terrain. The wind was ceaseless and bitter. It tore at everything in its course. Serpentine paths coiled around desolate mountainsides and dead valleys in perilous confusion. Sometimes they dropped away into chasms or vanished altogether in a titanic heap of fallen snow from the slopes above them.

It was an apposite landscape in which to encounter, finally, the man I had tracked for months and with whom my newspaper had demanded I secure an interview—a deadly landscape for one of the most deadly of men.

Yes, I too was afraid, but, unlike my nomad guide, I had no choice but to go on, despite tales of the Baron's fanaticism. My editor had made it very clear to me in the last telegram I had received that if I did not get the story they required I could rot in Russia for all they cared. My money was almost exhausted, and further funds would only be wired to me once I had delivered my copy. The Baron had become a *cause célèbre* back home. The public were clamouring for news of him, their stupid appetite for

sensation having been roused to fever pitch by rumours filtering over to Britain from this hellish region on the far side of the globe. The Baron was the hammer of the Bolsheviks, the merciless slayer of the Reds, a ruthless demigod with reputed supernatural powers. And he did not take kindly to outsiders showing an interest in his affairs.

After having fought in the Russian Civil War on the side of the White Army, he had found himself master of Mongolia, lauded by the Bogd Khan, spiritual ruler of that country. His cavalry army was drawn from Russia, from Mongolia and from Tibet. His beliefs were a recondite mixture of Russian Orthodoxy, of the divine rights of kings and of esoteric Buddhism. He saw the communists as the greatest evil that has arisen to enslave mankind, since they sought the destruction of all spiritual truths. They were the agents of Anti-Christ. The West was finished, so he thought. Corrupted by materialism and bureaucracy, it had abandoned heroic idealism and allowed itself to sink into a morass of urbanised (and hence artificial) values that alienated it from the true realities of Nature. It was from the East that salvation would arise, from wilderness lands that had not yet disconnected themselves from the wellspring of primordial and cosmic spiritual truth by descending into degenerate materialism. He saw himself as the fulfilment of the Kali Yuga—the Dark Age—who would finally destroy the West, and out of its ruins bring about the dawn of a new golden age.

I pressed onwards, occasionally jabbing my boots into the side of the reindeer to encourage it to stay the course. It was, like myself, close to exhaustion, and had once or twice previously tried to throw me when I had drunkenly grasped at its antlers for additional support. I believe we were both equally sick of one another’s unwashed stench and surly presence.

The snow began to fall again just as we began a slow climb up a trail winding along the side of a cliff-like ridge. By the time we were halfway up, with no possibility of retreat, it became a blizzard. The swirling wind dashed flakes into my exposed face, crusting my beard with ice, half-coating my eyes and forcing me to squint. I was enveloped in a world of white-out,

lost in an infinite blank page without beginning or end. Perhaps my newspaper story would never be written and I would perish here, alone and forgotten—save for a campfire anecdote about a stupid foreigner spun by my nomad guide for the amusement of his Tsaatan tribe.

Then the reindeer abruptly gave way. Its head slumped, its legs buckled and a last ugly gasp issued from its lungs. I was thrown against the side of the cliff, with the beast lying across my right leg. I struggled free, clutched my rifle and saddlebags close to me, and lay there sandwiched between a carcass and the cliff-side. Luckily the fall had not shattered the paraffin lantern I had tied around the animal's neck. It was my sole source of comfort.

The madness of desperation drove me on. Unless I attempted the ascent I knew I would die here, for I was dangerously close to hypothermia. I gulped down the last of my vodka, felt a little glow of warmth in my guts, and began to crawl along the cliff-wall. What progress there was, was almost interminable, and each forward motion was hampered by the gusts that threatened to hurl me off the narrow path altogether.

I must have crawled for hours, for the wick in the lantern was burning dim, when I at last reached the summit. As if on cue, the snowstorm completely abated, having, like me, exhausted itself.

The moon, now much closer to the horizon, broke free of cloud cover and illuminated the landscape beyond.

I was on a plateau of great immensity, an unbroken expanse of hinterland, and could see far into the distance. About a half-mile away, by my reckoning, lay a vast swathe of felt tents, the habitations of choice for the nomadic warriors of this region, and a mass of hundreds of tethered horses. Surely I had at last reached the camp of Baron Maximilian's cavalry army?

My speculations on this matter were suddenly terminated when two shadows disengaged themselves from the inky blackness formed by a cluster of huge rocks to my left and revealed themselves to be a pair of wild-eyed and lean Cossacks. They fell upon me silently, bludgeoning me with their rifle butts,

despite my feeble protestations, until I succumbed to unconsciousness.

*

When I awoke, I found myself tied to a chair inside a tent, with a dull, thudding pain in my head. Standing in front of me, cocked pistol in one hand, was a tall, gaunt figure. His garb was oriental in style—a long yellow robe with voluminous sleeves—and upon his breast was fixed a medal for bravery: the Russian Cross of St George. His moustache and beard were grizzled, and his long reddish hair unwashed. Though his head was smallish, he possessed a lofty brow and from beneath it stared out a pair of piercing pale eyes. These eyes were not level, but lopsided, the left being noticeably lower than the right, but they were possessed of a supernatural intensity. As they stared into my own I felt as if they were boring through the retinas into the very depths of my brain, and rooting out there my innermost thoughts.

"You are English," he said. "I speak the language well."

How he had gleaned the fact, except by magic, I could not say.

"Yes. I am a reporter for the *London Evening News*," I replied, "and not a combatant. I came here to interview you."

"In this day and age all men are combatants. There are no neutrals; a man is either on the side of the Divine or on the side of godlessness. Which is your side?"

There hung about my neck a medal of St Christopher that my fiancée had given me for luck and, by way of response, I drew it out from beneath my shirt.

The Baron stepped forward, examined it, and a thin smile flickered across his face.

"So!" he said, finally slipping the pistol he had kept trained on my head the whole time back into his pocket.

The legends about his fanaticism were true, then. I am sure he would have shot me had I not worn a symbol of faith.

"I will give you an interview in due course," the Baron said, "but in the meantime, you will have the honour of joining my forces for our final victory over the Bolsheviks."

Then he turned his back to me and swept out of the tent like a gust of yellow flame.

*

Thus it came to pass that I was forcibly conscripted into the Baron's army. Any thoughts I may have harboured about desertion were quickly dispelled by accounts of what happened to those who dared to flee the sacred mission upon which the Baron's army was engaged. When caught, he had them either flayed alive or else hanged in the trees. The trail of mutilated bodies he left in his wake was a testimony to his utter ruthlessness regarding deserters. It was said that no deserter had ever escaped his retribution.

We English will bear any horror in our habitual garb of quietist desperation!

My days were a long round of near-starvation, terror and brutality on a scale beyond anything my imagination could have conjured up. We took what food we could find, raiding villages, or else living off the land, scavenging like beasts. There was no possibility of doing anything other than obeying the Baron's orders if one wished to live. His regime was one of Holy War and continual prayer allied with discipline and asceticism of the highest order. Having forsworn the use of drugs and alcohol several months ago, he was now devoted to absolute control of mind and body. Anyone who flouted this regime would be stripped naked, left outside the camp in the freezing air and forced to survive for days on a diet of raw meat. The Baron's war was directed at the internal as well as the external forces that led to godlessness.

Our forays against the Bolshevik Army were a dazed blur of attacks and retreats punctuated with the screams of the dying, the clatter of horses' hooves, flashing sabres and bloody red carnage. The stench was appalling—battlefields littered with mutilated corpses, their exposed entrails steaming in the cold air, the smell of blood mixed with the bile and faeces that had spilled from their guts.

But always at the forefront of any military engagement was the gaunt form of the Baron astride his white horse, his long

yellow robe open at the chest, revealing the holy talismans he wore. All wondered at their supernatural efficacy, for bullets appeared to whistle past him, even from weapons fired at close range. Death, it seemed, could not claim him, and he charged through the ranks of Red soldiers like the Archangel Michael, shouting prayers and slashing with his sabre left and right, his pale face and beard splattered with gore and his eyes aflame with inner certitude.

"Truly," I once heard him cry, above the roar of battle, "are we like unto the glorious dead in Paradise!"

But if there was honour in his bravery during battle, I found nothing of it in his dealings with civilians. To the Baron, each one was a potential threat. He regarded communism as a disease that might have infected any individual he came across. His faith in his ability to supernaturally detect friends and foes meant that he had only to glance at someone before deciding they should be shot as traitors. During my time with his army I saw dozens of men, women and even children put to death at his command. When it came to the children he justified himself by saying that, if left alive, when older they might one day seek to revenge themselves against him and thus thwart his holy mission.

*

Finally I was granted the interview that had first caused me to seek out the Baron. After weeks of service in his army he decided I had earned the right to question him. He told me that any account would remain unpublished in any case, and that the whole thing was pointless.

"The papers in the West are so sunk into materialism, so saturated with decadence, that a fair hearing is impossible. They will distort your copy, rewrite any favourable impression you may inadvertently make, and continue to spread their lies," he said.

"It is true that in the past I have taken," he continued, "vast quantities of vodka, hasheesh and opium, but it was never sufficient to blot out the full horror of the monstrous world in which we live. They call me a mad Buddhist or else a fiendish Orthodox Christian, but the truth is that I am essentially only a

humble spiritual man. It is the world, and not I, that has gone mad. I hold all my men in equal regard, whatever faith they possess, and they must be forged in a regime of steel so they become living weapons in the struggle. Against us stands a gang of murderers of all spiritual culture. In trying to turn this world into a materialistic paradise they will send mankind to hell. Their kind shows no mercy, for they are too far gone in depravity, which is why they must be shown no mercy in return. One cannot convince typhoid that it is mistaken in its actions. These are the rules of engagement in this, the climactic struggle: destroy or be destroyed. All religions are, at the primordial level, one, but the atheists' alternative is the chaos of relativism, where evil becomes good. Those sinners who turn profanity into a virtue are the cancer eating away at spiritual civilisation. Crazy women with their legs open, hoping to corrupt the saints, we must get rid of all that."

"What of Bolshevism?" I said. "Do its adherents not believe it stands for something worthwhile, the liberation of the proletariat from the ruling classes? Even if they are misguided, surely they are not evil?"

His eyes blazed paler than ever, like white fire.

"It is a deceptive pose," he replied, his voice rising in pitch, "a symptom of the disease. These godless usurpers believe they know better than the Almighty who has ordered this universe according to his eternal laws. The usurpers do not wish merely to dethrone the Almighty, but to rule in his stead, and accelerate the devolution of men into beasts."

"They cannot all be evil," I said.

"Do you think demons have not become more subtle in their arts? Why, when they possess a man in this age, outwardly he might still appear quite normal to the untrained eye. He may not even realise he has been ensnared. The only barrier to demonic possession is faith. My foes have their duty and I have mine. I tell you this: I have seen their vision of the future. Let the atheists gain control and the twentieth century will be the bloodiest ever. Lies will be proclaimed as truth, and the masses, through their swallowing of endless propaganda, will cease to

think of salvation. Hundreds of millions will perish in the coming conflict, many more than have died even in the recent Great European War.”

“Surely such barbarity could not come to pass!” I cried out.

“You think I project my own prejudices or my own hatreds? You are wrong, desperately wrong. I act on behalf of the Divine. I am merely an instrument. *I am nothing in and of myself but the expression of the Will of the Almighty. Like a prophet, I have seen the future. This is the age of Revelation.*”

“But how are your acts reconcilable with the god of love?” I replied.

“You have read the scriptures. The first time Christ came in the name of love. Woe to those who rejected his love. But when he comes again it will be as the final judge—for this time he carries with him a sword. There will be a reckoning, and hell on earth will be unleashed upon the unrighteous. So it is written, so shall it be. In Islam, in Christianity, in Hinduism; in the final days of the spiritual empire, as it falls into ruins, the liberator will return.”

*

But as the weeks passed it became clear that the Baron’s campaign was doomed. His assaults against the Bolsheviks were invariably inconclusive, and the leader of the Red Army, Leon Trotsky, had taken a personal interest in his destruction, sending wave after wave of soldiers to the East in an attempt to crush the Baron’s meagre forces now and forever. When master of Mongolia he had harboured wild schemes of riding in glory all the way to Moscow itself, routing the revolutionaries, reconsecrating the burnt-out churches and reinstalling the holy reign of the tsars. But now, this goal had been completely exposed as nothing more than a dream.

When his men were captured they were tortured horribly for information. Peasants who had aided the Baron’s army were summarily shot by firing squads. The atrocities carried out surpassed even those he himself had sanctioned, and the Bolsheviks held the upper hand. The balance of terror had shifted

irrevocably. His men began to desert in droves to the Reds, knowing that the final victory in Russia would inevitably be communist and not tsarist. No amount of regimentation and discipline could compete with this fact. And those that remained in his army were now turning against him, having had enough of hunger, of torture, his schemes of final glory aided by the supernatural intervention of the Divine, and his talk of regrouping his forces in fabled Shambhala. He despaired now of Mongolia and hatched a fantastic plan to head south across the Gobi Desert, and then to cross the mountains of Tibet, disappearing into the heights of the world and rejuvenating his spiritual mission by means of achieving the sacred aim of contact with the Hidden Masters of the World.

After the Baron revealed this final, impossible scheme to his exhausted followers, they made several attempts on his life in the space of a few weeks. They were covert, cowardly affairs, shots fired off wildly before the perpetrator fled the camp. Only from the middle distance would these attacks be undertaken, for he still retained that personal aura of immense authority that made any show of defiance in his direct presence result in the crumbling of one's own resolve. His assailants would inevitably flee once they had made their attempts on his life, and ride straight to the nearest Red Army grouping. There was nowhere else to go after such betrayal, no other possible shelter from the inevitable horrors that would follow if they were ever recaptured by the Baron.

With two dozen others I followed him for a few weeks more. We travelled via a mixture of motor vehicles, camels and horses in a snaking convoy across the wastes. But gradually, one by one, his entourage slipped away. Some died on the trek across the Gobi Desert, some simply fled, until in the end only he and I remained, two shadows on horseback lost in the endless leagues of burning sand.

"I abhor cities," he said, through sand-crusted and chapped lips, "they are tombs. No man is truly alive who lives in such places, imprisoned by grey concrete and a labyrinth of hideous streets and factories. For me the vast open spaces are not

where a man loses himself, but where he discovers himself. Men must test themselves against the full force of nature rather than be bloated worms infesting and feeding upon a corpse. I tell you, our souls are perfected by suffering and not by comfort. We must purge ourselves of industrial life. We should level all cities so that men can be men once more."

After making these remarks he remained silent, and scarcely seemed conscious of my presence during the course of our terrible journey.

His beard and hair had become matted, his face and exposed chest red-brown with sunburn, and the array of talismans on his person glinted like mirrors in the bleak rays of the fierce daylight. I was reminded of the wild prophets in the wilderness brought to life in the stained glass windows of cathedrals, and of the anchorite sanctity found in Byzantine Icons.

*

I remember my final sight of him. The morning sky was a molten riot of colour as the red sun rose in the east, and I saw the Baron bathed in fantastic illumination, his outline framed by the shadows of the titanic Himalayan peaks. He turned back only once; his pale eyes standing out from the shade like twin pools of light. He spurred his white mount onwards, crossed himself in holy observance and made for the distance, entering those mystic extremes wherein no commonplace man might follow. I stood and stared for hours until the heavens clouded over and heavy snow began to fall, covering his tracks forever.

*

Egremont set aside the text he had just read and poured himself a dribble of wine. He had exhausted the contents of the bottle.

The stranger was staring intensely at him, in expectation.

"Well?" he finally said.

But before Egremont could frame a response, a small white private ambulance screeched to a halt outside the café, its rear doors were flung open from the inside and two burly men clad in white coats leapt out from the rear. They made directly for the table at which Egremont and his companion were seated.

The stranger was on his feet in an instant and made as if to flee, but the two men were too quick for him and managed to wrestle him into the back of the van before he could make good his escape.

“Murderers!” he cried out during the struggle. “The demons have got me! I am to be executed!”

As soon as the rear doors were locked and their quarry was safely confined, one of the men came over to the startled Egremont, who was now on his feet. He ran a handkerchief across his moist brow and ventured an explanation.

“My apologies for the trouble you have been caused, sir,” he said, in a thick Russian accent, “and I hope I can rely on your discretion. He almost gave us the slip again. We have been driving around this district endlessly in search of him. He managed to escape while we were transporting him to the secure psychiatric institution in Chambleau.”

“Who is he?” Egremont said.

“An escaped lunatic, and a very dangerous one. It was fortunate that we found him before he attacked anyone else. He has been at large for several hours now.”

Before Egremont could ask another question, the man turned on his heel, and jumped back into the van, which promptly sped away.

The waiter had emerged from the café, drawn outside by the commotion, and he courteously adjusted Egremont’s chair after he had slumped back into it.

“Remarkable,” the waiter said. “It seems as if you had a lucky escape, monsieur.”

“But this makes no sense,” Egremont replied. “You see, that person I have been talking to sent me the documents here on the table, along with a note requesting that we meet today. I don’t understand this at all.”

*

During the following days and weeks, Egremont saw no news reports mentioning an escaped lunatic having been at large in Paris.

He also made extensive enquiries in search of a psychiatric institution in Chambleau, but found that no such place existed. It was, however, during the course of these enquiries that he found an old and faded photograph of the Baron Maximilian. And he was startled by the uncanny resemblance between that long dead nobleman and the pale-faced

man in the army greatcoat with whom he had talked outside the café in Montmartre.

The Other Tenant

Robert Zachary first became aware of the tenant in the next-door apartment a week after moving in. He never saw the person on the landing that connected their two flats, and did not hear anything that indicated his or her comings and goings. Rather it was the sound of the television set filtering through the thin wall after midnight and continuing until dawn that provided confirmation of occupancy.

Zachary's neighbour appeared to be a devotee of strange and disturbing programmes, because the noise, though crackling and static-riddled, incorporated screams, moans, and even, seemingly, long monologues of a macabre, deranged, nature.

Doubtless these programmes constituted the other tenant's own personal selection, because Zachary could not track the broadcasts on any of the channels currently being transmitted, even with recourse to an up-to-date and extensive terrestrial, cable and satellite guide.

Perhaps, he thought, the other tenant only had access to a series of video cassettes of degraded quality, for the ruinous soundtrack did not indicate the high-end reproduction afforded by modern digital formats.

Had Zachary slept in accordance with the usual workaday pattern, the one he had followed for the last thirty years, and had his sleeping routine not been severely disrupted by months of illness, he might not have developed his obsessive fascination with the viewing habits of the tenant next door. But the lack of an organised daily routine, such as he'd long become accustomed to when employed by the television news company as a journalist, had meant that the hours he was awake and the hours he slept were a confused maze of time.

There were occasions when he discovered it was impossible to sleep before 5 a.m., some when he was exhausted by midday, and others when he had slept through an entire twenty-four hour period altogether.

With his being only a few years shy of retirement age, the state-owned company had decided that it would be possible to grant him his pension early, and thus allow him to battle his undiagnosed organic illness without having the worry of considering when it would be possible for him

to return to work. In truth, however, Zachary suspected they were relieved not to have him lingering in the news office.

He looked like a corpse already; his once lustrous shock of thick white hair had all fallen out, and his inability to keep food down, combined with loss of appetite, resulted in a degree of weight loss that was frightening in its rapidity. His joints ached, unsightly purple blotches appeared randomly on his skin, and he had difficulty climbing stairs, or in taking any form of exercise, due to fatigue and shortness of breath.

None of his clothes fitted him properly any more, all of them being far too large for his emaciated frame, and they hung from his body in baggy folds. His overcoat was as huge as a bear's hide. He disturbed his colleagues, whose displays of sympathy were tinged with the awkwardness that invariably accompanies an ever-present reminder of human mortality, and, since Zachary had no wife or family to support him in his day-to-day life, he imparted to them the details of the suffering he underwent.

An illness that cannot be identified by the medical establishment is an awkward gap, like an unsubstantiated alibi. Though some form of leukaemia was mentioned as a possible explanation, the exact diagnosis was never confirmed.

Had he been at management level it is possible that some advisory or consultative role would have been assigned to him, a privilege by which he might be partially withdrawn from active participation in business affairs but not entirely removed.

But he had given up all ambitions of management in his early thirties, and had been content to forfeit the perks associated with increased responsibilities. He had gradually drifted into becoming the trades-union representative, and had exercised power by way of opposition without responsibility. Though he had sought the adulation that had been his real aim all along via this circuitous route, he had not obtained it. His intrinsic bitterness had been too apparent, even to those who were ideologically in sympathy with him. He did not possess any real sympathy for his fellow man, on an individual basis, and tended to divide them into categories, each according to a scale of general characteristics, such as gender, skin colour, politics and degree of disability.

Naturally, with recent cut-backs, the board felt justified in not extending to Zachary any considerations that were not strictly mandatory, and even his "comrades" were glad to be rid of him, since they had long

since seen through his public image. In terms of liberal or leftist views, his conduct was impeccable, but, when it came to personal relationships, it was a case of him being liked for his ideology, not for himself.

And it was exactly the friendship of those his own age he required, but that was neither a business nor an ideological consideration. He had not earned loyalty or respect, because those qualities were not a feature of his own behaviour towards others.

This situation resulted in his being, through his own efforts, cast adrift amidst much younger and more ambitious staff. Either they resented him and his endless “do-gooding” or else they did not remain long in the company’s employ. It was nigh impossible for him to forge meaningful personal relationships.

That Zachary had lived into an age for which he had little hope—and towards which he was utterly antipathetic—was evident to himself and to those members of society with whom he was forced to interact.

The fall of the Berlin Wall had signalled the end of his hopes for the worldwide adoption of atheistic communism. Those insightful people who detected his disappointment were few in number, but their natural, albeit unconscious, recoil at Zachary’s habits and appearance was all the more devastating.

Chiefly, of course, his new personal contacts consisted of those who attempted to stem and reverse the nameless disease that threatened his life—with the doctors and nurses of the local hospital whence he obtained the debilitating drugs by which they attempted to kill his mysterious affliction before he himself was killed by the side-effects.

With regard to his body, Zachary had admitted defeat. He had accepted the creed of seeing his existence as merely a materialistic accident of circumstance, and nothing more than the sum total of what a flesh and blood being could experience during the course of any individual sojourn in total reality.

This stance had been accentuated by age; for he saw all of the events taking place in the world as being echoes of all those that had taken place before, in a form differing only according to minor variations in the cycle.

Wars, famines, earthquakes, floods, massacres, continuous from decade to decade. Only the details changed, only the names and faces; the essence was invariably the same. As a student, manning the barricades of the protests in 1968, and looking forward gladly to another cultural

revolution, one along true Marxist lines, he would have sacrificed himself rather than live to see a future where supernatural mumbo-jumbo lingered on as the opiate of capitalistic oppression.

The doctors and nurses all concentrated on his physical well-being, on extending the delay of a natural process. No supernatural force had ever come to his aid. Doubtless someone of a weak mind would have gone to Lourdes to gather with all the other fools in hope of miracles that never came. Lourdes, that Disneyland of the Roman Church!

Perhaps science, Zachary thought, returning to an old theme, would one day finally dethrone the idea of God. It had achieved great gains by virtue of holding out the possibility of its conquering physical death. It was now able to thwart, for a longer period than hitherto, what had always been considered inevitable. Science alone was worthy of a man's respect. It was a force that drove into disarray all those superstitious fools who challenged materialism and the historical necessity of the eternal revolution.

Zachary did not fear death—for that was mere oblivion, a snuffing out of an insignificant candle-flame—but he feared the pain accompanying the descent into its depths of blackness.

Though he had been a Catholic in youth, he scoffed at the martyrdom of the age of the Apostles, and the iron faith of its saints, for it was many centuries in the past, and now mere legend, if it had ever really existed at all except as propaganda. He laughed at those who still claimed to be believers and who feared they now existed in occupied enemy territory, in a corrosive secular age. They required corrective re-education.

Such an outlandish notion as the soul was the cranky preserve of old women with covered heads who knelt in the corner of near-empty churches. A cover for a conspiracy whose aim was to tyrannise over others in the name of a dead god. If there were any answers to the problems confronting humankind they were to be found only in Marxist solidarity. Anyone who thought otherwise was a victim of false consciousness and deserved to be socially ostracised. It was a merciful act really, for, in other times, they might well have been shot for the greater good of the revolution.

Not that Zachary ever voiced these opinions aloud. He had managed to advance his own party agenda—not by being completely open about its aims, but rather by a process of stealth and by discrediting whatever moral authority the reactionary opposition tried to claim. The only loyalty is party loyalty. The party and truth were indivisible.

And he would try not to think about those enemies of the people and their ideas over and over again at night, when he wished to sleep, but he could not escape the fact that his mind proved most active in those darkest hours. During the day he avoided self-reflection, and drowned himself in his books, learning nothing new since he sought out only the ideas of those who confirmed his own viewpoint and who belonged to the party.

Nevertheless he craved thought-extinguishing sleep at the end of it all, sleep that acted like a blessed narcotic, for it alone blotted out all the distractions to which he was prey. When he thought he had conquered the worst of these distractions, and when sleep came more easily, then it was that he began to notice the sounds filtering through the wall separating his apartment from that of the other tenant.

Since it had proven impossible to ignore them, over the course of the first weeks since their advent, he had come to anticipate the distractions and found himself staying awake until they began—always at the same moment, down to the exact second.

It is true that at first they diverted Zachary from his own self-absorption, but their nature was such that any relief was transitory, for they proved only to be a bridge from one form of troubling apprehension to another.

The sounds consisted, as has been mentioned previously, of crackling and static-riddled screaming and moaning, interspersed with lengthy monologues of a self-accusatory cast. Zachary attempted to jot down some gist of the words he'd heard, but the result was a jumbled mix of almost incomprehensible ravings and filthy expletives.

It must not be thought that Zachary, during the early part of the manifestation of his problems with his neighbour, did not attempt to put a stop to them. He hammered on the adjoining wall several times, shouted through it, left notes the following morning, and finally even tried knocking on the entrance to the other tenant's apartment at all times of the day and night.

Not once did he receive any response and no change was effected in the maddening routine to which Zachary had become a victim. In moments of paranoia, he suspected the other tenant to be engaged upon a vindictive campaign directed against him personally, but for what end he could not conceive.

He eventually contacted the owner of the building and got a list of all the various sub-owners of the flats into which it had been divided. The owners of the apartment of the other tenant were an estate agency, and when Zachary contacted them his enquiry was met with bewilderment.

They informed him, by letter, that although they took complaints of anti-social behaviour, and especially the type of noise pollution that he described, with the utmost seriousness, they were also, in this instance, at a loss to know how they could be of any assistance. Their records clearly indicated that the property in question had been unoccupied for several months, and furthermore, that, during the period in which Zachary claimed the trouble had begun, it had remained unleased to any tenant.

Indeed, such was their concern, they sent a representative almost immediately upon receipt of Zachary's letter in order to investigate any illegal occupancy, and this person had duly gained entrance to the property, only to report back that there were no signs at all of any squatters or other intruders having gained entrance to the premises.

Given this information, and the lack of any official way forward in order to resolve the situation, Zachary decided to take it upon himself to investigate.

He initially hesitated before this course of action, but his agitation and paranoia had reached such a pitch that it was impossible to do anything else. Zachary had passed night after unbearable night lying awake and listening to the audio horrors streaming through the thin wall separating the other apartment from his own, and he was now entirely in the grip of a single obsession; namely, that of discovering the secret behind the divide.

It was not difficult to gain access to the apartment of the other tenant, and Zachary did so one night after yet another interminable period of lying awake and listening again to the bloodcurdling broadcasts or recordings to which he had been subjected over the course of the previous weeks. On this particular occasion, he felt, he would either put an end to them once and for all or else go mad from their cumulative effect.

Crossing the landing that separated the entrance to his own apartment from the other, he discovered that its door-frame was rotten with age, and guessed that a shoulder charge would, in all likelihood, make it give way entirely, exposing its locks as more decorative than sturdy.

So it proved, and, despite Zachary's severely weakened state, he found himself stumbling over the threshold into the confines of that

mysterious series of rooms adjoining his own.

The noise he'd heard from his own apartment and which he might have expected to cease upon his arrival was now almost deafening in its intensity.

It emanated from a television set. The device appeared to date from the late 1960s or early 1970s. The glow from its black and white images filled the empty room with a haze of electric monochrome shadows.

Zachary moved in front of the screen, and sat down in a chair positioned in the middle of the barren room. Next to one of its legs there was a large clawhammer and about thirty nine-inch nails. Though perplexed by the strange debris left behind by whoever had occupied the apartment before, Zachary's attention returned to what was being displayed on the screen.

The picture was ruinous, as a result of being imperfectly tuned into the channel on which the images were carried, but he was able to make out the main details despite the interference and snow-bursts of static.

A painfully thin man was imprisoned in an empty room, and seated in a chair. He was gazing at something in abject terror, something currently off-camera, and whatever it was must have been a hideously shocking sight. His features were difficult to distinguish—rendered indistinct by the poor quality of the broadcast, though his crackling screams left no doubt he was gripped by an intolerable sense of anguish.

Zachary was able to tear away his attention from what he saw and heard on the screen long enough to wonder about the machine itself. And in doing so, he was only more horribly astonished. For one thing, the television set was not plugged into a power socket. For another, there was no indoor aerial connected to the set, and no connecting cable to provide input for an outside source of transmission. The device seemed entirely self-contained, as if generating from within itself the nightmarish horrors that Zachary was seeing and hearing.

The screams of the man whose image was displayed on the television set intensified, and Zachary saw that he was using the clawhammer to pierce the flesh of his left arm through with the nails, thereby pinning himself to the chair. Despite the ferocious agony, he did not halt in the act of banging them in one after another. For the second arm, his right, he hammered nails into the underside of the other chair limb and then forced it down onto them, pinning that one too.

When his grisly task was accomplished, the picture closed in on the —until then blurred—face of the torture victim, who was now struggling wildly in the throes of a noxious insanity. His mouth foamed with a black saliva like tar and his eyes bubbled, oozing tears of blood down his pale cheeks.

It was at that moment Zachary found himself staring into his own features, frozen in a grimace of living death, whilst all of the rotten thoughts and all of the hypocrisy, all of the foul deeds and the lies he'd perpetrated during his life, played out on the television screen in the background, in a repetitive and agonisingly slow sequence of endless slow-motion replays.

He reached down for the hammer and the nails, eager to begin the work of spiritual redemption that lay before him.

*

"Yes," the estate agent said, "he died a week ago. He had nailed himself onto a chair in the vacant and long empty apartment next door. Probably for some bizarre sexual kick. Quite deranged. But he was, after all, terminally ill."

There was no denying the scandal, since it had been reported in all the local newspapers.

"But naturally we're prepared to lower the rent, because we'd rather it was occupied than not."

The prospective tenant nodded and he decided to sign the tenancy agreement the estate agent had taken out of a briefcase. He had little choice, as he was a declared bankrupt and this was the cheapest accommodation he could find. His career as an author had proven to be a complete financial disaster.

Within a week from the night he moved in he was disturbed by the sound of a television set blaring through the thin dividing wall. Whoever was responsible for the racket seemed to have a taste for watching nothing but horror films.

An Hourglass of the Soul

The afternoon had been an alternating series of English sunshine and showers typical for the time of year. Heavy drops of rain blossomed at the window, in a backdrop of leaden grey skies, before giving way to watery sunlight and a brilliant thin blue haze on the horizon. Robert Drax kept looking over his shoulder at the sight, having been placed in a cubicle at the corner of the building, with his back to a window that arched from one side of the enclosure to the other. The play of light and darkness continued for hours, plunging him cyclically from light to shadow, and lending an air of unreality to his mundane office surroundings. He had been distracted by the transitions, allowing them to occupy his attention and finding in them a welcome relief from his anxiety.

This was his third day of employment at the company, and he felt just as stunned as he had been on the first. He had moved out of his old flat less than a week ago and relocated to the residential complex provided for employees. It was only a short distance from the sprawling industrial estate in which were located the head offices of the corporation, Deregand Computer Systems, that had headhunted him a month previously. Their apartment flats were luxurious, situated in grounds with a gated entrance, swimming pool, gym and sauna. It was a far cry from the cramped studio flat he'd previously occupied in a dismal quarter of North London, where the rumble of traffic and the noise of drunken club-goers had kept him awake at night. Moreover, his salary was three times that provided by his previous employers.

But still he could not shake his sense of unreality. Everything seemed to have turned around for him so unexpectedly. Doubtless it was the sudden change from his former routine that had brought on the bout of migraines he'd been experiencing ever since the start of this stage of his life.

It didn't help that the man who had offered him the job, his new boss, departed the day after Drax's arrival. As a consequence Drax felt as if he had been left hanging without guidance in the unfamiliar environment.

As if conjured by the very thought, a communication from his boss appeared in Drax's Outlook Express folder.

Drax re-read the email a third time. He still couldn't quite take in its contents. Gholraqy Division? He drummed his fingers on the edge of his keyboard, and made snorting noises through his nose. Then he looked at the time at the bottom right-hand corner of the computer screen. It was now 4.15 p.m. And the flight he'd been booked onto was scheduled to depart at 7.30 p.m. He would have to hurry home, pack a suitcase, dig out his passport (wherever that was) and then be at the airport by 5.30 p.m. at the latest.

His boss had been on a business trip in the Far East when the problem had arisen. Normally it was an affair he would attend to personally, but, as he explained in the email, it was at this point impossible for him to do so. His own full attention and presence were required at his current location: the Hong Kong Division of Deregand Computer Systems.

He had, though, already arranged for the flights and accommodation, and it would only be a matter of Drax having to drop everything for a few days in order to reconfigure the mainframe.

"*I need hardly emphasise*," his boss had written in italics, "*that your readiness and enthusiasm in this matter will prove decisive during your initial probationary period with our corporation*."

In other words, do it, or you'll be out on your ear as soon as your first three months are up.

And where the hell was Gholraqy anyway? Drax had never heard of the place until now.

"You will need to fly from Heathrow to Ulaanbaatar, and from there it's another hour's flight by chartered aircraft to Gholraqy," the email stated.

Ulaanbaatar was in Mongolia, he quickly gleaned after a Google search, but of Gholraqy he could find no trace. Still, perhaps its rendering in English was widely variant from the original Asian language.

"One of our representatives will be there to meet you when you arrive at Ulaanbaatar," the email concluded.

*

Drax made the flight out of Heathrow with only minutes to spare. His passport had initially eluded him, being buried in the depths of one of the boxes he'd not yet unpacked since his hasty move from North London, but he finally located it, just as the taxi drew up outside the apartment block.

Within a couple of hours he was on board a plane flying at thirty thousand feet across the gigantic expanse of Eurasia. He lent towards the

small window at his side and watched the snow-covered wastes of Russia passing below. In his hand was a tumbler containing an excellent single malt whisky, and he rolled the ice cubes around the liquid, relishing the tinkling they made as they danced against the glass. His eyes occasionally roved towards the very small and pretty Asian stewardess who lingered in the background of the business class cabin, waiting to attend to his comfort. He had the whole cabin to himself.

Despite the comfortable surroundings, the lull of the background jet-engine drone and the effect of the whisky, he could not manage to drift off into a doze.

*

"How was your flight?" the little Mongolian asked, as he took Drax's suitcase from his hand.

"Very tiring," Drax replied with a yawn. "I didn't get a wink of sleep during the whole time. I'm quite exhausted."

The Mongolian nodded sympathetically.

Chinggis Khaan International Airport was a chaos of the senses; a mass of milling folk in a desperate hurry to get somewhere other than Mongolia. They charged one another with baggage trolleys, shouted at anyone in their way, and leapt to attention from their seats at the first chime prefacing a loudspeaker flight announcement.

"My name is Chang Qomul," the little Mongolian said. "I will fly us into Gholraqy."

"How . . . " Drax replied. "So you're a pilot?"

"No choice, someone has to do it. I am the only link."

"Will it be a long flight?"

"I calculate an hour, with the wind direction."

Drax was trying hard to avoid bumping into any Mongolians as they weaved their way through the corridors of the airport. People turned to look at him curiously as he passed them by. Perhaps, he thought, he was the first westerner they'd seen in the flesh. Or perhaps his imagination was playing tricks on him; for he fancied there were incipient smiles upon their faces.

Their destination was located at the extreme end of the terminal, away from the main flights to China and the rest of the Far East, and the two men exited the building directly onto a small runway where there sat a twin-engine Cessna aircraft. Qomul stowed the baggage in the hold, and

then climbed on board with Drax following suit. He made some standard pre-flight checks and then radioed the control tower for take-off clearance.

The aircraft taxied along the runway and then picked up speed, the rapid acceleration pressing Drax back into his seat. Within seconds they were airborne, and heading south towards the immensity of the Gobi Desert.

Drax looked down through the window at the desolate landscape below and then across to Qomul on his left. He had not flown in such a small aircraft before now, and the experience was beginning to unnerve him. It seemed a fragile and insignificant machine when compared to a commercial airliner where one was cocooned within the superstructure, almost impervious to the effects of the skies, save for occasional turbulence and the drama of take-off and landing. But in a Cessna it was as if one hung in the sky by a single thread and one could not help but be reminded of the precarious nature of flight at every stage. The plane bobbed, tipped, dropped and ascended nearly continuously in the fierce desert winds that surrounded it. Drax's stomach seemed to take on a life of its own, rising and falling in tandem with the motion of the Cessna. For the first time in his life he experienced air-sickness and tapped Qomul on the shoulder, indicating that he was going to vomit. The Mongolian grinned and produced a bag from a pouch above his head.

For the remainder of the journey Drax struggled against recurring waves of nausea, and tried to keep his eyes closed and the contents of his stomach down.

The Mongolian had been accurate when he estimated the flight time at around an hour. A few minutes shy of that period, the Cessna touched down on a barren airstrip located alongside a series of single-storey white-washed buildings.

Once it had come to a halt, Drax clambered out of the plane and, though his legs wobbled on terra firma, he remained upright. His head was swimming. The heat and light outside were incredible. The sky was a glass dome to contain heat piped up from the depths of hell. And on the desert's arid wind there were carried tonnes of sand, in endless grains, over thousands upon thousands of square miles. The particles rapidly clustered at his nose, at his eyes and at his mouth, forming a thin crust. He rubbed his eyes clean and put on a pair of sunglasses, turning the world from a brilliant intensity to a manageable vividness.

Qomul already had Drax's suitcase in his hand and was crossing the short distance from the landing strip to the nearest of the small buildings. Drax trailed after him, forcing his legs to work properly through an effort of will. He wondered how it was possible for anyone to be outside in the open in the incredible heat and felt a surge of fear at the alien landscape of the desert—and towards its hostility for human life.

Mercifully the interior of the structure they entered was air-conditioned. Drax had anticipated the abrupt drop in temperature, but still shivered at the transition. In the centre of the room space was the entrance to a lift. They were at the ground floor level of a deep excavation, and it seemed that the divisional offices of Gholraqy were entirely subterranean. The lift doors opened once Qomul had keyed in a security code onto a wall panel and the two men entered a small chamber, mirrored and carpeted, with "soothing" muzak as background ambience.

Presumably the other buildings he'd seen provided cover for further shafts, large enough to accommodate the transfer of equipment from the surface to the excavations below. But it all made no sense. Why, Drax thought, go to the massive expense of creating a business complex in the middle of a wasteland, with no transport links, and the additional requirement that it would have to be housed deep underground? Most corporations were inordinately proud of their offices and made great play about advertising such architectural totems. But then *they* tended to be above ground, and notable either for their height or their unusual designs. This form of construction seemed to have more in common with the secrecy required by a military rather than a business organisation. Drax hadn't even seen the Deregand logo blazoned anywhere. He began to frame a question to Qomul as they hurtled down the shaft in the lift cage.

"Why build so deep underground . . . " Drax began.

"Were you not informed? Herein was recently discovered what was reputed to be the ancient library of Gholraqy. Housed within a decaying vault are scrolls of inconceivable antiquity that foretell of the devolution of gods to men, contrary to the laws of Darwinism, and the so-called secret knowledge of elder wisdom mankind has supposedly lost. All mystical rubbish of course. Of interest only to cranks and dusty academics. And to think we found it by accident!"

"Yes, but . . . "

“The location was all that was important to us. It is perfect. The competition is ruthless! Our greatest product requires the level of greatest secrecy. It will make us market leaders for the foreseeable future and guarantee our shareholders enormous dividends! We will go to any lengths to succeed.”

The lift reached its destination and the doors opened. Standing outside them was a westerner in a black pin-striped business suit.

“My name is Krul,” he said, clamping Drax’s palm in a vice-like grip.

He was a middle-aged man with an untidy tangle of white hair and horn-rimmed eyeglasses. His face was a network of lines etched into his skin, doubtless the consequence of a lifetime of intense concentration—a type of premature ageing often denoting a mathematician or an obsessive chess devotee.

“I’m the director of this division. Have you been briefed by Qomul?” he said.

“He told me—”

“Good. I’ll take you to your quarters—you can freshen up after your journey and we’ll talk again in half an hour.”

*

Perhaps the travelling had affected Drax more than he realised. Of course there had been that episode in the heat, where he’d almost succumbed to dizziness, but this other sensation was even more alarming. Once he’d showered, he shaved, but as he gazed at this reflection in the bathroom mirror Drax was overwhelmed by the fact that his reflection appeared nearly alien to him, like the face of a stranger. Could jet-lag and anxiety do that to a person?

The meeting with Krul was becoming psychologically nebulous. It seemed as if recent events were already receding from his memory, like fragments of a dream only recalled months later. He remembered little of its content, save the explanation he had been brought over from London in order to oversee the first test of a new type of mainframe device, of the utmost secrecy. It had the potential, Drax gathered, to render all other currently existing forms of such technology redundant.

“Only you, and you alone, Drax, are competent to manage the vitally important first process,” Krul had said.

*

The disorientation rapidly intensified to the point where Drax almost felt incapable of sequential thought. That he was on the verge of a serious migraine seemed likely. But when Krul accompanied him along the black corridor to the chamber that housed the secret mainframe, he evinced no sign whatsoever of noticing Drax's confused state of mind. Drax could not shake off the foreboding in his mind that some impossible combination of death row and maternity ward was their destination.

They entered the chamber. There were dozens of supporting pillars sustaining the low vaulted ceiling. Housed in hundreds of niches in crumbling red-brick walls of clay were innumerable ancient scrolls, undeciphered and ignored.

And at the heart of this fantastic survival from immemorial antiquity was a stark symbol of modernity, vividly shocking in its contrast. Half-a-dozen technicians were situated at various monitors, forming a semi-circle around the central object: the mainframe itself, an oblong of wires and circuit boards seven feet high by two feet across, housed in a metal casing. Strip lighting on the ceiling glared down, bathing the chamber in a static lightning flash—an instant captured by eternity.

As if from a vast distance Drax heard Krul whispering into his ear.

"The most powerful super-processor in creation has been placed at the core of the device. All that we require is for you, Drax, to begin the networking sequence of instructions whereby it will connect with the global cloud array and thus access every single source of information in the electronic world; to access and then correlate it all into a new mode of efficiency. Up to now we have only begun preliminary sub-routines in the device. Only you can bring the device to full consciousness."

Drax stumbled forward, his head spinning, and he fairly lurched onto the machine.

Beneath the coiled mass of wires he uncovered the biological core of the machine, contained within a clear plastic bowl, the human organ floating in an endlessly replenished supply of fresh blood. It was pierced by hundreds of needles, like those employed by acupuncturists, with wiring leading off from the attachments into the depths of the machine.

Primary commands flickered across his thoughts: "Interface Ethernet 0/0 No Shutdown."

And then Drax was looking back at the memory of himself, as if through a glass darkly.

The procedure had failed, the machine rebooted for the hundred-millionth time and Drax found himself again staring out of an office window, looking at an alternating series of English sunshine and showers typical for the season. His memory had been deleted and once more he saw heavy drops of rain blossoming on the glass pane, a backdrop of leaden grey skies, before they gave way to watery sunlight and a brilliant thin blue haze on the horizon.

The Ruins of Reality

Once the economic decline really began to take hold and it seemed as if the final collapse of the edifice of Western civilisation could not be far away, signs for the N Factory began to appear.

These tatty, garish posters were pasted on the northern city's interminable series of boarded-up shop-fronts, and were accompanied by crumpled, grotty flyers that clung like barnacles to streetlamps, post-boxes and traffic light poles.

It was a desperate time, mass unemployment was a universal feature, and no one could doubt that the current order was in serious decay, with its potential demise not just another in a cycle of depressions from which recovery was possible. Society had become terminally diseased and all of the economic and socio-political solutions that had been proposed before were no longer advocated.

Men had lost all confidence in remedies and had abandoned hope entirely. Mass suicides were commonplace, and the usual means of pacifying or distracting the populace were sharply reduced or ceased to be available altogether as both power and money supplies began to dry up—television, video games, the internet, drugs, alcohol, sport, all were now curtailed.

Doubtless the posters and flyers for the N Factory would have been less noted in previous times amongst the plethora of the earlier opportunities for work that had been available to the populace. As it was, this bizarre and unexpected intrusion into the general sense of doom, this startling exception to the prevailing mental climate, was readily seized upon.

"Freedom through labour. Your country needs YOU." This slogan was emblazoned across every N Factory advertisement.

People thus anticipated the recruitment scheme with a feverish intensity. Speculation as to the nature of the labour involved was a part of everyday discourse; there were hushed whispers in private, and where people gathered together their talk centred on the rumours that were unavoidable. How well paid would its workers be? How long would the contracts last for? What were the hours? And so on, all in a similar vein.

The information given in the promotional material as to the type of regeneration on offer fuelled the speculation, given that it consisted only of a series of small, indistinct black and white photographs with captions underneath. It was considered that these examples delineated the types of degeneration into which the populace had fallen.

Representative of the examples were the following—

(i) The pockmarked face of a woman ravaged by syphilis, her lips twisted and ruined, her mouth a series of black gaps, followed by the caption "Beauty Dept".

(ii) A man whose face has been half-destroyed—presumably by a self-inflicted gunshot wound—superimposed over a dollar-bill sign, followed by the caption "Success Dept".

(iii) The broken body of a child sprawled in the middle of a motorway, its limbs twisted into unnatural angles and surrounded by a pool of its own blood, followed by the caption "Progress Dept".

(iv) A rabid monkey in a cage surrounded by wires, convulsed in the instant it receives an electric shock—its eyes bulging, foaming at the mouth, followed by the caption "Science Dept".

(v) Multiple aborted foetuses inside a half-transparent white plastic bag, with a pool of blood at its base, lying on a tiled white floor, followed by the caption "Humanism Dept".

(vi) The skeletal remains of burnt trees, their silhouettes stark against a bleach-white sky. The trees standing in a landscape of grey ash, followed by the caption "Ecology Dept".

(vii) The gutted remains of a cathedral, its twin spires like leprous fingers, raised towards a jet-black sky, followed by the caption "Rationalism Dept".

(viii) An obscenely old man copulating with a teenage girl, followed by the caption "Genetic Dept".

(ix) A tableau of a puppet-show, in which the puppets' strings have been cut and the dummies lie in a confused heap but with the cut-out faces of real human corpses replacing their original faces, followed by the strange caption "Dead Dreamers: Management".

Quite what this series of unnerving images had to do with the "regeneration" that the N Factory promised to provide seemed a question

not easily answered—but in a soul-destroying epoch of hopelessness they, at least, contrasted with the prevailing ethos of total pessimism.

So it was that I, merely another prospective employee amidst the multitude who had succumbed to the horrible desperation unleashed by the lure of the N Factory, found myself wandering the streets at the fringes of the city, and following the directions provided in order to gain admittance to the immense red-brick edifice wherein all the promised regeneration was to occur.

The process was to begin during the half-hour of twilight and, along the route, a variety of postcards stuck on lamp posts indicated that the prospective attendee was drawing nearer to the venue—and yet each of these cards was more ghastly in appearance than the previous one.

Finally the wanderer spied the twin towers of the vast structure, which became visible above the low clustered rooftops of the single- and two-storey buildings that dominated the skyline of the suburbs.

Most of the dwellings in this region had been deserted once the full effect of the financial crisis had bitten to the core, the inhabitants either having destroyed themselves in spasms of despairing ennui or else having moved away, hauling with them their meagre possessions, taking advantage of the opportunity afforded by the oversights of the former government—whose hollow promises of relief from debt were exposed as a ruse to entice the non-productive into “voluntary” extermination camps.

Given this last horrendous prospect, the sudden initiative by the N Factory, providing the alternative possibility of a vast number of jobs available to all those who sought them, proved irresistible.

The gigantic building was emblazoned with a sign declaring “Welcome to the N Factory”, and, outside the sheet-covered entrance, there was a kiosk where tickets and pencils were handed out to those seeking admittance. The tickets contained spaces where a scant degree of information had to be completed—name, address and age. A line of job applicants ran for thousands of yards in front of the structure, and was constantly being added to.

The numbers of those seeking to gain entrance appeared to be in the thousands, and the factory’s capacity must have been immense, enough to contain the entire populace of the city itself. The murmuring, the chatter and the atmosphere of tense expectancy could be detected close up to the

structure, its broken windows providing little barrier to the noise generated within.

My disordered imagination associated, bizarrely, the noise with that which an immeasurable mass of tomb bugs might make if given a single voice.

It seemed as if the soul of decay had manifested itself within the titanic, decrepit structure. Yet still the populace remained, almost in their totality, to seek their salvation inside.

I walked in line, despite my black thoughts, and doubtless my face was as pale and wan as all those others, and my thoughts, too, avidly turned towards the grim expectancy of release from the nightmare, from all of the charnel desolation the people were experiencing in the dying world outside.

I collected my ticket at the kiosk, filled in the cursory information required, and reflectively turned over the remains of what spare change I had in my pockets—the last of my available cash. It would enable me to purchase nothing more than a cup of coffee and a sandwich for my evening meal.

I was looked over with disdain by a grey-suited functionary, but was nevertheless waved inside.

Entering, I found myself in an antechamber, with rows of desks where groups of men “processed” the tickets.

A further grey-suited functionary, as anonymous as the others, then beckoned me over to stand in front of him. He rubber-stamped my ticket with the word “approved”, and then asked, in a flat monotone, when I would be available to begin work.

“Immediately,” I replied.

“Today?” he asked.

“Immediately,” I said.

“Right now?” he said.

“Yes.”

“Very good.” The functionary added: “Take the door to your left.”

He pointed to the doorway with a languid gesture and then turned his attention to the next applicant, who had been standing directly behind me. Several flights of steps led downwards and I began my descent. At the bottom of the stairway was a double door with a sign above its frame declaring: “Factory Floor—Employee Processing.”

I passed through the door and found myself inside a gigantic basement. The volume of people took me aback. The interior of the basement had been completely gutted, creating a space of enclosed immensity. In the centre there was a raised platform, rather like a stage, on which stood a number of podiums. Radiating out from this focus were rows and rows of machines, like over-sized computer terminals, at which multitudes of people sat. Their hands were tied to the arms of the chairs, but instead of staring into LED screens they were staring into the circular mirrors that were wired up to the machines. Their features were distorted and magnified by the cracked, concave, circular surfaces, producing crazed reflections.

I was seized by a couple of grey-suited functionaries and bound to a chair in front of one of these machines.

After a few minutes the array of interior arc lights set into the ceiling dimmed, casting the enclosed immensity into darkness and causing, as if on cue, a buzzing drone, like the grinding of enormous metal gears. The machines began to operate and the mirrors started to glow with an unearthly radiance.

*

The flickering neon lights picked out various corporate officials standing upon the dais.

A man in a tar-black business suit was there, whom I sensed was a supervisor or manager. His face was monstrously decayed.

The hideous woman marked out as representing “Beauty” was also present, as were the persons depicted as “Success” and “Progress” and “Genetics”.

And then, from the back of the vast chamber, the grotesquely damaged monkey that had been identified as representative of “Science” was led down between the aisles of machines. This bizarre simian carried a transparent plastic bag of bloody foetuses—previously described under the label “Humanism”—and from which grisly source it absent-mindedly fed itself, as if consuming nothing more significant than kernels of dyed-red popcorn.

A huge sheet was drawn back from a niche at the far end of the factory floor and “Ecology” was therein represented by blackened and burnt tree branches nailed together to form an inverted crucifix, at which conjunction there had been hammered into place a piss-coloured parchment

that bore the legend “Rationalism”, scrawled in blood-red crayon by a childish hand.

But, as yet, of the mass of the puppet folk described as the “Dead Dreamers”, there was no sign.

*

And then a strange lethargy seemed to creep over the remainder of the crowd, and around me I saw people beginning to show signs of tiredness and even exhaustion. The process was rapid, as if drugs had been recently administered, perhaps in the form of a gas contaminating the atmosphere. I myself felt the effect, but struggled against it with all the will power at my command, fighting to keep awake for as long as I could.

Eyes rolled in sockets, limbs twitched and a chorus of yawns ran across the mass of people, one after the other, their minds falling in domino fashion. Eyelids finally closed, though mine were the last to do so. I felt dread at the coming of unconsciousness, for, as my waking senses ebbed away, I had the horrible sensation of being suspended over an unimaginably deep gulf of dreams. And I knew that the dreams lurking in those depths were not the dreams of human life, but some strange variant from outside of the species, some form of thought and sensation opposed to the healthy workings of the brain.

I knew that to plunge into the depths of the dream-gulf would not be to experience mere nightmares, but rather to experience the source of nightmare itself, and I visualised it as a hideous reversed sun, of whose blinding darkness all nightmares, like feeble shadows, are merely the projection, its tenebrous rays polluting human imagination.

Resistance was useless and into the realm of darkness and dreams I fell, along with all the others around me.

I perceived I was not awake and yet I experienced a sensation akin to having awoken. It seemed scarcely an instant before I was again aware of all the people around me stirring and murmuring as they, too, appeared to have mentally clawed their way back to consciousness, recoiling at the prospect of being devoured forever within the Tartarean chasm of the pit.

I alone, I am convinced, knew that this respite was nothing but a cruel illusion and that we were all already buried down there in the abyss, interred in a prison-cell as definite as any coffin lying under six feet of earth.

We filed out of the N Factory, groggy with the horrors that we had glimpsed, and made our way back to the various run-down and dilapidated homes in which we dwelt. As we went through the gates, a grey-suited official thrust a greasy handful of low denomination notes into our palms.

And when we returned to work over the following days, no one could recall afterwards what further work we had done whilst we were there, for time spent on the production line in the N Factory was akin to a state of dreaming so horrible that the mind blots out the recollection.

But after all, a job is a job. And if one didn't work then starvation was the only alternative.

*

During the following weeks the crisis in society deepened. The rate of suicides, riots and murders intensified. And the fanatic popularity of the N Factory increased to even greater proportions.

It seemed that there was no one in the city who had not been to the production line, and all those who had done so, without exception, now became subject to full recollection of that ultimate abyss of nightmare into which they had descended. We cared nothing for the fact that the promise of regeneration held out by the N Factory had been a lie, and that its purpose was to accelerate a process we, the human species, had brought upon ourselves. Some said the Dead Dreamers were charnel demiurges, some said they were future spectres and others said that they were our own dream-selves, acting beyond good and evil. Whatever the truth regarding their faceless domination, "they" had now assumed ultimate control.

For now a devastating permanent winter swept across the globe, bringing with it an unaccountable eternal twilight that defied the laws of planetary rotation. And, accompanying this suspension of the laws of physics, there suddenly reared in the heavens a monstrous, never-ceasing *black aurora* that dominated the sky like an inconceivably enormous shadow.

Whether it concealed some nightmarish horror behind its opaque veil, or whether it was itself the essence of the terror that engulfed the world, no one could say for sure. But I believed it to be the manifestation of those diseased dreams that had torn asunder all of the hopes and aspirations of our civilisation.

It was with the appearance of that cosmic blight that, simultaneously, bodily transformations occurred in the physical forms of the populace. The

horrors previously contained within the hidden world of imagination were now given outward, corporeal, expression.

Bodies began to warp and twist into deformity, at first gradually, and then at an increasing rate. Spines bent, so that men and women assumed the appearance of hunchbacks; and then growths, like a deathly poisonous grey fungus, sprouted on people's faces and limbs. Scientists spoke of the cause of these physical changes being massive doses of radiation filtering through the Van Allen belts and bombarding the Earth's surface, but they could not account for the fact that this "radiation", if that was what it actually was, proved undetectable via any of their delicate instruments.

For my own part, I believed that dreams had spilled out into external existence, taking on a diseased life of their own, like a cancer that contaminated reality. The N Factory had been the means by which these dreams had been finally liberated from their mental confines and had thereafter infected the structure of existence itself. Madness had become the normal state of being. It was the only form of freedom left to an enslaved populace that had had all of its humanity drained out of it by the relentless tide of machine-identity to which it had willingly succumbed.

And all of the hideous examples of degeneration that the N Factory had delineated were to become not exceptions, but the ubiquitous facts of human existence.

Nature itself began to rot, and, as whole species were wiped out, strange, new forms arose in their place, crawling out from the polluted wreckage.

Alistair

Gryme House had stood for centuries, having been built in 1706 as an out-of-town home for a wealthy merchant. At that time Highgate was still a country village beyond London proper, when the metropolis was surrounded entirely by open fields with a swathe of woods off to the west.

The house stood behind an outward-bulging brick wall that was thick with green moss and which was tall enough to obscure all but the top floor and roof when viewed from the street.

The garden that lay between the wall and the house was overrun by weeds and brambles, being long neglected during the time that the elder Grymes had occupied the place. They had little time or inclination to keep the grounds in order and had let unchecked nature take dominion. Only the path from the rusted trellis gateway to the entrance portico was free of undergrowth. Covering it was an ivy-wreathed wrought iron passageway.

The ivy allowed no other plant to encroach into its territory, inexorably strangling any such intruder with its sinewy vines.

One might easily imagine that it was not just simple neglect that caused Gryme House to be half-hidden away, but that a deliberate concession to good taste had been made.

The sight of the house had long ceased to be picturesque, for, unlike its close companions, it did not possess the same aura of antiquity. The impression formed was instead of some growth that had sprung up from deep within the earth.

It was rotten and festering, projecting from the thorny undergrowth in the manner of a colossal fungus. External buttresses held up one side of the house from collapse and the roof sagged visibly. Plaster flaked away from beneath the eaves of the top floor, revealing a yellowish tinge like jaundiced skin.

*

James Thorpe’s wife, Amelia, had inherited Gryme House from her parents. They had died last year, and he felt guilty that his relationship with his in-laws had been so distant, even though he had never liked them. He suspected that Amelia also had tried to keep them apart, though he had little

evidence of this, only her vague indifference when it came to making a visit.

The house in Highgate had solved almost all of James and Amelia's financial problems in one fell swoop. Now they needed to pay no rent and thus their disposable income, given London prices, leapt. With the arrival of Alistair four years ago, their previous flat had been cramped, and now the child had the run of a three-storey house, albeit a decaying house sorely in need of major renovation.

Amelia's parents, the elder Grymes, had been in their forties when she'd been born, and by the time James came to know them, thirty years later, they were elderly recluses who scarcely ventured out of the house. Consequently, the building had fallen further into acute decay, despite its being on genteel South Grove in a prime location in Highgate, backing onto the disused and picturesque cemetery with its woodland-like ambience.

Much to James's surprise, Amelia had scarcely wanted to change anything in the house after they'd moved in. She was content, even glad, to retain all the furnishings and fittings that she recalled from her childhood: the antique furniture, the heavy drapes and the curios scattered inside cabinets and closets throughout the rooms.

Gryme House had been in her family for generations, and, being the only offspring of her parents, Amelia displayed enthusiasm at the prospect of entering into her birthright and passing it on to Alistair in turn. She would shepherd the boy around the rooms, explaining to him where each object came from, and how old it was, and how one day it would belong to him as it now belonged to her. This sometimes made James feel like an adjunct to the two of them, integrated as they both were into the soul of the house through generations.

The only part of the building that had undergone any significant change had been the room on the second floor that James had turned into a study.

It had formerly been a spare bedroom, used whenever the old Grymes had received visitors, which had been not at all except for those rare occasions in the past when he and Amelia had stayed over.

He'd kept the wall panelling and introduced several bookshelves in which to store his collection, added a bureau to store those papers he needed close at hand and a laptop computer so he could work on the biographies that formed his main writing income.

He'd turned away from fiction in his mid-thirties, not being able to generate enough sales to get out of the mid-lists, and realising that it would only be by chance that he'd ever strike it lucky in that field and produce a bestseller. His agent had suggested the change in direction and, although James found the transition easy enough, the fact that it had not been made of his own free will, but was forced on him by commercial considerations, continued to rankle. Instead of producing a body of original work himself he was instead writing about the lives of dead writers who'd succeeded, where he'd failed, in establishing at least a literary cult reputation.

His book *Thomas De Quincey: Heaven and Hell in a Jar* received cordial critical notices and his next two, *Anna Kavan: A Soul in Ice* and *Stanislaus, Count Stenbock: A Peacock Life*, were hailed as masterpieces of definitive re-evaluation. They'd brought in more money than James had earned before whilst trying to make a living as an author, although it was still not enough to enable him to feel that he was comfortably off and, for all his hard work, all he ever seemed to manage was to keep the family's collective head above water financially. Other writers that he knew who had stuck with fiction were forced to pen either erotica or to ghost-write celebrity memoirs in order to bring in a decent income, but this was not a route that he could consider without coming to the conclusion that it represented a fate much worse than his own.

He further explained away to himself his having decided to take such work after the birth of his son when, he claimed, his self-centred ambition to be recognised as a serious novelist stood between him and providing the very best that he could for his own family. But the birth of Alistair had not given James the emotional connection that made this plausible.

When he held the child in his arms in the hospital, after the birth, he'd expected an overwhelming rush of pride, a sense of genetic continuity that was primal in its force, but, although he'd been relieved when the pregnancy was over and all was well, he hadn't experienced that new sense of living totally for his offspring that he'd been told would follow.

It had been different for Amelia. The bond between her and Alistair had been immediate and of a depth that he found startling. James had scrupulously avoided exhibiting any feeling of jealousy, and had settled into the role of attentive father without qualms, but at the centre of his relationship with the boy was a psychological gap that he could not, try as he might, fill.

He couldn’t help thinking that it was the consciousness of this gap that made him acquiesce when Amelia’s parents died, and she suggested that they move into the old house instead of putting it on the market and using the proceeds to find a place of their own. He’d hoped that, by entering fully into that side of his wife’s life, in the place where she’d grown up, he might somehow become absorbed more deeply into the older ancestral familial dynamic that existed between her and their son.

But all he had done was to turn himself into even more of an outsider. The memories Gryme House contained were alien to him and his study had increasingly become a refuge as well as a place of work. It was the one space in the building in which he felt completely at ease.

Sometimes he’d sit up there late into the night, pretending to work, but actually drinking himself into a semi-stupor, until an hour when he was sure Amelia would be asleep and his crawling into their bed wouldn’t wake her.

Occasionally, on his way downstairs, he would run into Alistair prowling around in the darkness, playing some silent game of his own devising. Nothing was said between them and the boy would scamper back to his room at James’s approach, the subject not raised in front of Amelia the next morning. James wondered if he cut a terrifying figure in the shadows, a father in the guise of a drunken giant, his aspect altered horribly after the midnight hour. If that were so, it had become their secret. At least this much they had in common: both were night people. If only Alistair didn’t look so much like his grandfather, Ezekiel Grymes.

*

Alistair often had screaming fits in the night. He could only be comforted by the presence of Amelia, and would cry out even louder when James tried to stand in for her. For a while he tried to overcome Alistair’s disdain for his attempts, but the result was invariably that the child’s agitation became alarming, to the point where James became worried that the neighbours might think Alistair was being abused. He’d suggested that Alistair might have some undiagnosed medical condition, but his fears were dismissed by Amelia, whose ability to calm Alistair down took a matter of minutes and was sometimes almost instantaneous.

When he asked her what she did to make the boy tranquil again she explained that it required nothing more than soothing words and a mother’s

embrace. Again, James was conscious of the gulf that existed between them.

On one occasion, after having failed in his attempts to soothe Alistair, once Amelia arrived to take care of him, James had been forced to leave by the child's discomfort at this presence and made to wait outside the bedroom.

He heard Amelia whispering something to Alistair in a strange language that he could not understand and which sounded like no language he had heard generally spoken before. The words were delivered in a guttural, throaty way that varied in intonation and tone, as if inflexion played a key part in its structure.

He was reminded of the time when, during a visit here to Gryme House when it was occupied by Amelia's parents, he'd overheard an argument between the ancient couple that had switched, as their fury mounted, from English into the same bizarre and outlandish dialect.

It consisted of many consonants and few vowels, but was delivered not in human accents but in a manner more like the growling of a dog.

*

Close by Gryme House the hillside necropolis of Highgate broods over London from one of the city's highest points. The vast cemetery is in two parts, divided, by the treacherously steep thoroughfare of Swains Lane, between the older West section and the newer East section. Most of those with an interest in the Eastern area are drawn by the fact that Karl Marx is buried there, his grave marked by a grotesque and enormous concrete bust.

The Western area, on the other hand, has tended to attract a different type of devotee: nocturnal seekers after the weird, the horrible and the fantastic. For them the region is a wonderland of charnel glamour. Since the 1970s, when vandalism, rumours of ghouls and satanic rituals were rife, it has been closed to the public, except for guided tours.

The high walls surrounding it do not deter these devotees. Nor do the gates that are always locked. The lure of the Victorian Gothic world within draws them back time and again; they make obeisance to its riot of crumbling mausoleums, tombs and headstones and its wild woodland landscape, as surely as any worshipper in a church.

But, unbeknownst to those who frolicked above ground, deep in the depths of the hillside, other beings frolicked. Their world was one of darkness, their territory a series of warrens that opened out into the bottoms

of graves, mouldering vaults and musty catacombs. For centuries they had fed on what was put into the earth in coffins, sucking the marrow from bones even after the flesh had rotted away. Their cackles and giggles were muffled by the weight of soil above their heads, and no echoes resounded around the cramped tunnels through which they scurried.

Of late, their numbers had dwindled, and some of the more inquisitive of the underground beings had ventured all the way to the surface in the middle of night, sniffing the air and gazing wide eyed with awe at the sight of the moon in the sky. The lunar-light was a glittering pinprick of silver in their dead-black eyes.

*

Alistair looked down at the cemetery from the window of his bedroom on the first floor. The full moon allowed him to see almost everything that was taking place there. He watched as the strange dogs emerged from mausoleums, or pushed aside gravestones from below. It was much more exciting than any of the DVDs that father and mother allowed him to watch, although some cartoons were almost as good.

It was late and he'd awoken in the middle of the night, which he did on a regular basis now, but he was careful to try and not disturb his parents, who were probably asleep. He'd slipped out of bed, clad in his Scooby Doo pyjamas, and relished the freedom he'd gained since they had taken away his cot with its barred sides.

Once he'd moved a stool in front of the window, it was easy to climb up onto the sill, stretch out along its length and look down over the grounds of the cemetery. Sometimes, at night, Alistair would see foxes, even badgers, but of late he'd not seen as many and when they did appear they were often snatched away by the strange dogs.

The game the dogs were playing seemed to have ended.

Alistair yawned.

He was thirsty but it was a long way down all the stairs to the kitchen. He remembered that there was half a chocolate milkshake in the fridge; he'd not drunk it all when father had taken him to McDonald's and he'd brought it back home.

He still had trouble with the stairs and found going down them scarier than climbing up. Perhaps that was because of the tumble he'd taken, when mother and father were afraid he'd broken his wrist.

And it would mean going down the stairs in the dark, past his parents' bedroom. The thought of the darkness didn't scare him at all though and he could never understand why anyone would fear what was such a wonderful place to hide.

Alistair climbed backwards off the window sill and then jumped lightly from the stool to the carpeted floor.

He opened his bedroom door as quietly as he was able and then padded down the corridor until he came to the stairs. He could see pretty well in the dark, much better than people realised, so that was no problem, but the sheer scale of the dizzying descent he would have to make made his stomach flutter.

He'd have to tightly grip the rails of the banister as he took the steps one at a time so as not to fall over in the dark.

The house was old, incredibly old, and seemed to have a life of its own. It groaned and creaked in the night as if shifting in its sleep. Alistair believed that it was probably the oldest house in the world, but he knew its sore points.

He knew which steps groaned and which floorboards creaked when they were trodden on and he adjusted his footfalls accordingly.

It seemed to take forever, and at the halfway stage he'd almost turned back when the grandfather clock had loomed large and struck the hour of three just as he passed it.

Once the chimes had died out and the low thudding of the pendulum could be heard again, it seemed that the house had turned in its sleep, spluttered and then was snoring once more.

Alistair pressed on until he came to the ground floor. He ran his fingers across the bottom of the coats hung up in the hallway, enjoying the feel of his mother's faux-fur. He had an urge to pick up one of the umbrellas in the elephant's foot stand, and flourish it about, as if it were a rapier and he was Peter Pan, but thought better of it.

A rectangle of moonlight streaming in from the end of the hall lit up the black and white tiles of the kitchen floor. The tiles were cold underfoot after the warmth of the carpet covering the stairs and the corridors, and Alistair felt the shock of the chill in the soles of his feet. He pottered over to the refrigerator, a huge white fifties' retro model, and stood on tiptoe in order to reach the handle. He tugged at it and pulled it back, squinting as the inside light turned on and it exhaled an icy breath.

There, on the middle door shelf, next to a bottle of iced tea, was his milkshake carton. He took it down and slurped through the straw, looking around at the contents of the fridge as he swallowed the chocolaty drink.

There were all sorts of foodstuffs and drinks in there that he'd never tried. In the middle shelf was a joint of lamb that had been left overnight to defrost after being stored in the freezer compartment. It lay in a dish and, peering more closely, Alistair saw that a pool of red liquid had collected around its base.

He put down his milkshake on the floor and dipped his fingers into the dish, turning his fingertips red. He then began licking them clean. After that, he carefully took the lamb and dish out of the refrigerator, laid it on the tiled floor and then used his straw to drink up the rest of the redness, which he found much more delicious than milkshake.

From outside he heard the howling rising again from the graves in the cemetery, and scampered into the garden.

He would climb the separating wall and see his grandparents, and his grandpa who was his real Papa.

They probably had a special treat for him.

They had promised one day that they would take his substitute Papa away for good when he was a big boy.

My World Has No Memories

When I awoke, it was to the roar of a storm at sea. Gradually, as my senses returned, I became aware of its ceaseless motion all around me, engulfing the world. I was aboard a small vessel, alone, and with no memory of how I came to be there. I struggled out of the single berth in which I lay and my first thought was that I must have suffered a blow to the head, causing concussion and amnesia. My memory was a blank.

The vessel showed signs of occupancy for many weeks. It stank of my unwashed body. The galley was covered with a film of grease and food supplies in the overhead lockers appeared about half used. I ran some water over my head from the sink and then swallowed a cupful. My throat was very dry and I assumed I had been unconscious for many hours.

Above the sink was hung a small shaving mirror. A drawn, unshaven face that I did not recognise stared back at me. My reflection. I guessed that it belonged to someone in their mid fifties. Eyes blue. White hair shaven close to the scalp. Very thin. Not handsome, not ugly. Gold wedding ring on the third finger of his left hand. No inscription inside the band.

The cabin was eighteen feet long by eight feet wide. It contained all the essentials for a lengthy ocean-going voyage.

By the side of the radio was the ship’s logbook, charting the progress of its course, and the last entry gave its position as being unconfirmed. The previous entries were garbled, with notations detailing the difficulties of getting accurate sextant measurements from the sun or stars. The only information it yielded up to me of any satisfaction was the name of the vessel: the *Pulsar* out of Poole, Dorset.

Contact with GPS was gone, as if the damn satellites had simply fallen out of the skies. All compasses aboard were wildly unreliable, their needles pointing in differing directions.

I tried the radio set. Nothing but static on all frequencies. There was no response to my Mayday requests.

The self-steering mechanism had been operating all the time I had been unconscious. I did not adjust it, since I assumed it was set purposely towards some definite destination, or preferred course, and passed through the cockpit hatch up onto the deck.

A blast of salty wind hit me, making my eyes smart. It was refreshing and clean; a stark contrast to the foul smelling air in the cabin. I gazed across the turbulent sea stretching in all directions, foam and spray sweeping over the monohull yacht. The four sails were up, billowing in the air, driving the vessel through the surging walls of seawater.

The sky above was a sheet of uniform gunmetal grey, featureless and grim, giving no indication of the sun's position. It may have been morning or afternoon.

Retreating back into the cabin, I sought out the *Pulsar*'s emergency flares. Perhaps, I thought, if there were another ship within a reasonable distance I could alert it to my presence. I found the flare gun but there was no sign of any cartridges. Doubtless I had already exhausted the supply in previous attempts.

How long, then, had I been at sea? Months probably. But to what purpose? Had I set out on the voyage to escape some disaster or had the disaster struck unexpectedly while I was already at sea? The latter possibility seemed the more probable. Then again, might it not be the case that I had fled in advance of the cataclysm, having been forewarned of its impending approach? That seemed likeliest of all.

It was all so maddeningly vague. I was certain that something terrible must have occurred but had no memory as to its exact nature. My inability to make contact with the outside world, indeed the very lack of any evidence of there being an outside world with which to make contact, was a strong indication of some worldwide calamity. Had this event in some way affected my brain, impairing my memory to the extent that I could not even remember my own name and history?

What was the cataclysm? Some enormous burst of radiation from the sun, a stupendous solar flare that knocked out the global communications system, and also somehow affected the magnetic poles? I could come up with no better solution to fit the facts.

It was either that or madness.

*

I cooked myself a meal in the galley. It consisted of toast, scrambled eggs and curry powder. My appetite, however, was listless and I picked at the food without enthusiasm. The cabin was insufferably damp, with condensation on the roof, and all around me raged the noise of the sea, an unending primal roar that encompassed two-thirds of the globe.

By now it was getting dark outside, and, having finished my meal, I turned on a lamp, and wondered how best to pass the night before sleeping. I wandered over to the single shelf of books forming the *Pulsar*'s small library. They were mostly navigational and technical books of seafaring, but amongst their number was also a handful of other, more general titles.

Next to them, shoved well back into the recess of the shelf, was a large glass jar. I could not see clearly what it contained, masked as it was by shadows, and so adjusted its position, drawing the jar towards me. But when my fingertips touched the glass object I almost recoiled. It felt warm, wet and sticky, as if containing something alive and radiating heat. Repulsed, I slipped on a pair of rubber gloves lying close by on the worktop I utilised for repair of my electrical devices.

Suspended in a transparent fluid was a monstrous flower the size of a grapefruit. It must have been preserved, not for its aesthetic quality, for it was hideously ugly, but instead as a specimen of abnormality. Perhaps it most resembled a rose in its shape but a rose that had suffered some hideous malformation or disease.

Firstly, its multitude of petals, filaments and stamens were a leprous white colour. Secondly, across the whole of the surface of them, there ran a series of tiny circular suckers, as are found on the skin of Cephalopoda.

I randomly opened the stopper on the jar a fraction. A fishy odour, like that of something washed up from the sea and left to rot in the sun, wafted over me.

I felt nausea, as if drugged. Then there flashed into my mind's eye a nightmare vision.

I saw a succession of such decomposed flowers rising from a watery abyss, their filaments oozing black ink and forming incomprehensible sentences in a spidery script on the surface of the ocean. The symbols intersected one another in spirals and whorls like fingerprints, forming a non-successive narrative that was being constantly dissolved in the foaming spume, only to be reproduced all over again.

Suddenly I was gripped by a sense of hideous panic, as if I were on the verge of passing out. I knew, with a terrifying certainty I could not account for, that the diseased rose of the depths had sought to communicate with me telepathically. But to submit to its intent would be an act of suicide; and *only by being driven insane could I possibly comprehend its meaning*.

I stoppered up the jar with a tremor of revulsion and then gazed at it stupidly for several moments.

There could surely be no doubt now; my reason was in danger of tottering. I was suffering from some form of mental illness. Still, there was one thing I could do to alleviate a symptom, if not the cause.

I went up to the deck, clutching the jar, and then hurled it as far as I could into the depths of the roaring sea and the black night.

A ferocious headache assailed me, almost making me lose my balance and tumble overboard, but I managed to grope my way back into the cabin and collapsed, insensible, into my berth.

*

When I awoke hours later it was still dark outside. My headache had passed, and the sea was calm. The *Pulsar* scarcely moved and there was no sound of wind or waves. I went up on deck and saw a sky full of brilliant stars, crystal clear in their intensity but strangely unfamiliar. Perhaps I was now in the southern hemisphere, and this accounted for the lack of recognition on my part, or else the appropriate part of my memory was a lacuna, obliterated by the damage done to my mind. Nevertheless, with a clear sky, it might be possible for me finally to get a fix on my position.

I hurried back below deck to retrieve my sextant and star charts, but stood dumbfounded when I discovered that there, on the small bookshelf, rested the same jar I had recently tossed overboard.

Moreover, the flower inside had grown, filling the jar and displacing the stopper until it had wrapped its filaments around the adjacent item, a book. I thought of hacking away the threads and throwing the whole thing overboard again, or else burning it on deck, but turned my attention to the more pressing matter, retrieved my star atlas and sextant and went back on deck.

After more than an hour of effort I was no closer to determining my position. The stars in the night sky corresponded to none of the charts contained in the atlas. Consequently, my sextant was useless. There was no sign at all of the moon. All I could hope for was that the sky remained clear until dawn, when I could get a rough fix with the sextant from the rising sun.

At least I could be sure of one thing, I was neither in the tropics nor close to either of the polar regions. The temperature was too moderate.

I was about to make my way below deck to the cabin in order to destroy that maddening flower when I spotted a series of objects floating about a hundred and fifty yards off the starboard bow. They were pale, grouped together and floating aimlessly in the currents like a shoal of jellyfish. The faltering breath of wind in the air was scarcely sufficient even to pilot my vessel across the short distance, but eventually I coaxed the *Pulsar* alongside them.

Looking over the side I saw that they were all human corpses, more than a dozen of them, bloated by the gases of decomposition, and doubtless these gases had brought them to the surface from the depths of their watery graves. As I gazed at the sight, more and more began to bob up to the surface, their numbers increasing with each passing moment as if some Atlantean necropolis were giving up all its dead.

I was now surrounded by bodies on all sides and the charnel stench was appalling.

Then I noticed something that had been partially obscured by the various states of decomposition the corpses displayed. They were all alike, with closely cropped white hair, males of the same age, as alike as a series of dead clones. I suspected then the monstrous truth about them, and lowered a grappling hook over the side to haul one of the cadavers on deck in order to confirm my fears.

I managed to snag a body after a few tries and hauled it on board. It did not seem as badly decayed as some of the others and must have perished quite recently. It was not bloated with gases, as were the others, and I was glad of it, for I did not think I could have brought myself to handle some of the foulest specimens.

Turning the body over, so it was facing upwards, the truth was evident. My own features confronted me.

I was about to toss my double back over the side when, to my amazement, his eyes flickered open and revealed leprous white roses blossoming in the sockets. A mixture of blood and seawater bubbled from his mouth. He was not yet dead after all. His hands grabbed my shoulders in a feeble grip and he drew me down closer to him. A watery gasp issued from his throat as he choked out his dying words.

“ . . . flowers sing in the gardens of madness . . . ” was all that I could make out of the sentence he uttered before he expired. Doubtless he had swum up from the depths and, if it was not a death by drowning, then

the nitrogen bubbles forming in his bloodstream during the ascent had finally finished him off.

He was not breathing, and there was no sign of a pulse, so I rolled the body over the side of the deck back into the sea, where it floated.

Again, that damnable flower! It was the key to this nightmare series of events and, I thought, only by its certain destruction might I bring an end to the horror.

I went below deck and found that the thing had grown during my absence. Its filaments and stamen had now spread over the whole of the bookshelf, whilst its bloated central mass had burst from the confines of the shattered jar.

It pulsed with an obscene life, oozing filthy spume from its puckered white surface. I hacked at it with a serrated knife, cutting through its pulpy form, until I was covered with its black nectar, and then gathered together all the fragments and dumped them into an empty oil drum. I carried it up on deck, poured petrol into the container and set the contents alight. As the flames consumed the mass of diseased pulp inside, I heard it sizzling in its death throes, its nectar spitting and splattering against the interior of the metal drum.

And then I was seized again by a recurrence of that ferocious blinding headache, blotting out the world entirely, and I stumbled and fell at the foot of the mainsail, grasping at it for support.

*

When I awoke and had recovered my senses sufficiently, I found I was still clutching the mainsail. The drum had vanished, but now there were titanic flowers all over the deck, and toppling over the sides into the ocean.

They had entirely expelled all the cabin’s contents and forced them overboard, so that the waters around the *Pulsar* were full of shattered debris, now mingled with all the decomposed bodies floating around the vessel.

The wind had picked up and, as I turned my face in the direction of the breeze, the glare on the horizon told me that it was just before dawn. I saw an unearthly motley of intensifying colours as the minutes passed before the disc of a sun rose above the rim of the earth.

My eyes were now itching horribly and I thought that they were deceiving me, for the object I saw was of such a vast extent that its visible radius encompassed a full quarter of the horizon.

Inexorably, the totality of that gigantic *multi-coloured* sun rose into view, its sickly rays casting a spectral reflection on the ocean.

As I watched, hypnotised by the impossible vision, with black ink dribbling down my cheeks, I heard dead laughter, and realised it issued from myself.

Outside Interference

Most of the staff had already been transferred out of the old Bloy Building. Only a handful of the company's employees remained, located in a single office on one floor, amidst the thirty other storeys that were now vacant except for the dusty debris left behind in the course of the removal of the building's contents. Constructed in the early 1960s, in the then-fashionable Brutalist style of architecture, it had now decayed to a point past the possibility of further renovation. Just to look at it was to suffer the feeling of gazing upon a corpse in steel, glass and concrete. One instinctively wished for a controlled explosive charge to blot out the sight of it for good, as one would wish for the cremation of a badly decomposed body discovered by accident.

Those of us left inside were engaged in the last rites of the transfer to the new premises on the other side of the country. All of the old company paper records (housed in rusting filing cabinets) were being made digital, and it was our task to transcribe and then forward them electronically. It was tedious, mind-numbing drudgery, and only the most unfortunate and ill-regarded of the Bloy Company's staff, of which I was one, had been assigned the duty.

Each of us resented having been singled out in this manner, and having been left behind as our fellow employees departed, and the dissatisfaction manifested itself in our general listlessness, absenteeism and slow rate of progress. There was also a widespread suspicion that, once our task was finally completed, forced redundancy, at the minimum legal rate allowed, awaited us.

Moreover, to compound our misery, we were trapped not only in the prison house of the old Bloy Building but also in the middle of the coldest winter snap for a century or more. Although the leaden skies and arctic temperature continually threatened heavy snowfall and the happy chance of our remote work location being cut off from the outside world, preventing our attendance, the expected blizzard did not materialise. Daytime consisted of a few hours of murky twilight, followed by the onset of a mid-afternoon darkness, without sight of stars or even of the moon. A freezing and bitter gale continually battered at the Bloy Building, whistling through its

structural cracks, and running in swirling draughts along the abandoned stairways and corridors. It almost seemed as if the dying edifice was gasping in the icy air.

The heating had been cut off when the central boiler had been decommissioned and we sat around in our scarves, hats and overcoats, with only a few emergency and ineffectual electric bar heaters dotted around the remaining functioning office. All of the smaller surrounding buildings in the industrial park having been deserted months ago, we were left in a tenantless wasteland, and even had to bring in our own meagre pre-prepared meals for lunch, what with the shops and cafés (as well as the Bloy Building's own internal staff canteen of course) all now closed.

And so the grim routine went on, day after day, with the company minibus picking us up in the mornings at 8 a.m. from the nearest railway station forty miles away, before depositing us at the Bloy Building, and then dropping us off back at the station in the evening at 7 p.m. Olek, the driver, was a taciturn and bald old man with a drooping moustache, who we all knew was a secret toper. He would often put to his lips a tarnished hip-flask, even while at the wheel, and, though he claimed it contained nothing stronger than an indigestion remedy, his breath and glazed expression told the true tale. Thankfully, however, there was an almost complete absence of traffic on the route to and from the station to the industrial park and Olek seemed incapable of driving the company vehicle even minutely in excess of a top speed of thirty miles an hour.

*

I had been desultorily chewing on a cheese sandwich and inputting the contents of a folder twenty years old into my computer when I glanced up and saw the first flakes of snow outside the window. Within minutes it had become a blizzard of frenzied intensity. It was Popov who first voiced all our fears, Popov who, amongst us all—we adepts of slacking and daydreaming—was the undisputed master of work-evasion and idleness. His ability to turn what was normally a few hours typing into a task of Sisyphean magnitude was legendary.

"Unless we get out of here now," he cried, "we're going to be stranded! Perhaps for days!"

"We need to find the driver Olek and quickly," I replied, "before the roads are completely impassable."

A general murmur of agreement passed between the half-dozen of us in the office.

Just then we heard the ping of the lift door opening in the corridor outside as the machine announced its arrival on our floor. As one we rushed towards it.

Slumped in the corner of the cage was Olek. A thrill of horror passed through us all like an electric shock. He presented a hideous sight. Although his crumpled grey suit was untouched, it appeared that he had recently passed through a searing inferno. His face and hands were monstrously burnt, the skin blackened and peeling away from the flesh. His formerly bushy moustache was charred and patchy on his upper lip. It seemed impossible that he could be alive. We managed to drag his body into the office and propped him up in a chair.

As I fumbled for a pulse, however, a tremor ran through his frame and his eyelids popped open.

His eyes were blank white, as if boiled in their sockets.

And then, slowly, with a nightmarish air, his features composed themselves into an expression I can only describe as a fusion of insanity and mockery.

He turned his head from side to side, regarding us with those dead eyes, before getting to his feet.

Despite the horror of the thing, Popov boldly took a step forward and said,

“Olek, what has happened to you? In God’s name! We must get you to a hospital, we must all . . . ”

In a voice whose words were like the rustling of dry, dead leaves Olek cut in.

“Leave me alone!”

With a sudden motion he darted past us, gained the corridor, and was within the lift, the doors closing before any of us could catch up with him.

“The stairs! Quickly, we can’t let him get away. He must be making for the minibus,” Fodot, the office junior, said, his high-pitched wail echoing down the corridor as he took the lead.

We took the stairs down as quickly as we were able, with Popov puffing away some distance behind us, his vast bulk uncertain on the steps. After a few minutes we emerged into the raging blizzard outside, and were almost knocked off our feet by the force of the wind. The snow stung our

faces with icy barbs and it was difficult to make out anything in the white-out. But we heard the noise of the mini-bus engine starting up and the low grumble as Olek put it into gear.

And then, from the sound of its approach, we realised that it was being driven directly towards us, and Olek intended to mow us down in cold blood. But the poor visibility worked in our favour, not his, for he careened wildly, having finally accelerated some considerable margin beyond his customary limit of thirty miles an hour and crashed with a deafening impact into the side of the Bloy Building, turning the front of the minibus into a crushed wreckage of metal and glass.

*

Popov was the first to try his mobile phone to contact the emergency services, but all he got was a blast of unending static on the connection. We all tried in turn on our own phones, having retreated to the lobby of the building, but with the same result. Any number that we tried to reach was dead except for the sound of loud static.

Fodot was shaking and pale with fear, Irena Krug (the sole female in our party, a spinster of sixty) had begun sobbing out prayers, Popov seemed to be in shock, and the two other men, Kartaly and Leszno, were conducting a fierce argument between themselves as to the next best course of action, whether to flee into the snowstorm or return to the office and await assistance. My own mind was racing and I tried to put together the pieces of the unearthly jigsaw in which we had been enmeshed.

Obviously, the first question was how it was that Olek had come to be so horribly burnt and yet apparently alive. Could he have set fire to himself in a fit of madness? And yet why was his clothing untouched? It made no sense. And did his behaviour relate to the fact that our phones had ceased to function properly?

Leszno, meanwhile, after nearly having come to blows with Kartaly, dashed into the lift.

“The landlines upstairs may still be working,” he said, “if we try . . . ”

His words were cut off by the automatic doors closing themselves. We waited a moment, expecting him to push the button to re-open them manually, but instead the lift began moving. We watched with bewilderment, for the floor-level indicator showed that it was descending to the basement rather than ascending to the seventeenth floor where our

office was located. Despite frenziedly pushing the call button to return the lift to the lobby, there was no response, and the floor indicator winked out, showing nothing at all after remaining fixed on the basement sign for a short while.

Miss Krug suggested we take the stairs down to the basement and force open the lift doors, thereby freeing Leszno.

Accordingly, we descended via the flight of steps down to the basement level. After banging on the lift doors and receiving no reply from Leszno, we managed to lever them apart via a combination of forcing open a gap using the blade of an emergency fire axe and then pulling from both sides at once.

Beyond the doors we saw nothing but the lift shaft itself. The cage was not on this level. I put my head into the gap while the others held the doors apart. Looking up, I could see nothing but darkness, but from the unfurling movement of the cables close at hand it seemed that the lift cage was still descending and had reached a considerable depth below the ground. Then, faintly, but unmistakably, I could hear the distant and muffled sound of frantic screams issuing from deep down in the vertical shaft.

My thoughts inevitably returned to the fact that we had found poor Olek in the lift after he had suffered his hideous burning, and I could not help but speculate that a similar torture was now being experienced by Leszno leagues below.

The horrified looks on the faces of my companions told me that they, too, had heard what I had heard and it was a grim mercy when the sounds were completely silenced once the lift doors were released and tightly shut.

“I had no idea that there were sub-basements below,” Miss Krug said.

“None that I know of,” Popov replied, with a tremor in his voice.

There was nothing else for it but for us to make our way up the stairway to the seventeenth floor on foot and try to communicate with the outside world via the telephones and computers in our office.

We had only reached the ground floor when I heard the noise, from the stairway, of something knocking at the glass doors to the lobby. Telling the others to stay where they were, I quit the stairs and entered the lobby alone. Some secret sense told me what it might be that was making the sound, and I was not mistaken.

Behind the glass, half obscured by the swirling snow outside, was the mangled corpse of Olek. It had returned to the building, crawling on its belly, despite its horrific injuries. Most of his head was smashed in on one side, both arms and legs were broken in several places, and when I looked at him I was reminded of a crushed bug that still wriggled its limbs in its death spasms. He was slapping the palms of both hands against the glass over and over again. All of the fingers were missing.

One other thing: when he first saw me he grinned mirthlessly, as if we were sharing a private joke, and black blood drooled over the broken teeth—exposed where the whole of his lower lip had been torn off.

I forced my gaze away from the sight, stifling the scream bubbling up from my lungs, and went back to the stairway, slamming the door to the lobby behind me.

"What was it?" Popov asked.

"I couldn't make it out. The snow's falling too heavily," I lied.

He snorted, his hand reached for the door handle and I grabbed his wrist, sharply pulling it away.

"Don't," I said.

He stared at me blankly, an angry retort forming on the tip of his tongue.

"For your own good, don't," I said.

*

The climb up to the seventeenth floor took a long time. Popov's unfit bulk and Miss Krug's aged limbs slowed us down, and, although Fodot wanted to dash ahead, I insisted that we all ascended at the same pace and were not separated by more than a few yards at any time.

When finally we reached our office, the hope that our ordeal was beginning its end, and we would be able to summon help from the authorities, was dashed. The landlines carried the same impenetrable static signal as our mobiles, and all the computers, too, displayed only a snowy electronic fuzz on their screens. Nothing could be done with them. It was as if they had been infected by the blizzard roaring outside.

Miss Krug kept tapping away at the keyboard of her own machine, and repeatedly re-booting it in the desperate hope it would miraculously return to normal.

Popov slumped to the floor and ran a none-too-clean handkerchief across the cold sweat sticking to his brow.

“We have to wait until the snow eases up,” Kartaly said, his eyes blinking repeatedly behind the lenses of his horn-rimmed spectacles, “and then one of us needs to go for help. There’s nothing else for it.”

Fodot was leaning against a wall and smoking a cigarette, his eyes as dead as the stub of ash at its tip. I was worried he would crack first, being the youngest and most highly strung of us.

“This isn’t natural!” Popov cried. “Going for help? Pah! You fool! This isn’t just a snowstorm, that’s not all that’s going on. What the hell happened to Olek, burnt to a crisp and still alive! No answer! And what of Leszno? Descending into floors that don’t exist . . . it’s impossible! I tell you, I believe we’re all going stark raving mad!”

I was glad, then, that I had prevented him from seeing the even more fantastic sight of what remained of Olek banging away at the glass doors in the lobby. As this thought crossed my mind, the lift pinged in the corridor outside, indicating its arrival on our floor.

I spun round, expecting to see the grisly remnants of Olek crawling towards us, as if summoned up by my thinking of him. But it was not Olek who appeared in the office doorway, it was Leszno. He was clutching at the frame for support, having staggered from the lift across the width of the corridor.

The visible flesh was charred and blackened, the remaining clumps of hair on his head still smouldering. Though his clothes were untouched by the heat, his eyes had been boiled all-white. Exactly like Olek as we had first discovered him.

But this time, no one rushed to his aid. We merely stood there, dumbfounded and horror-stricken.

Leszno coughed raspingly several times, as if trying to clear his throat and lungs of smoke, and then he tottered across the room until he half-collapsed onto the seat directly in front of his computer terminal. He then slumped forward over the desk and stared fixedly with those white eyes into the chaotic burst of static on the screen. His black, almost skeletal, fingers began to roam all over the computer keyboard like twin spiders.

Our terror partly conquered by curiosity, we crowded around Leszno in order to see what he was doing.

Popov poked him in the shoulder.

“What’s going on, Leszno, eh?” he said. “What happened to you, eh?”

Momentarily, Leszno turned to him, and drew back his leathery lips in a snarl, baring his teeth. A hollow, mechanical growl sounded in his throat before he turned his full attention once more to the screen.

Was it just an optical illusion or did the static alter its form according to some rhythm or pattern Leszno was typing out on the keyboard? It seemed almost as if vague images were on the verge of being manifested via the fuzzy interference, and that his tapping of the keys was an attempt to bring them into focus. But always, despite his frantic efforts, the images proved too unstable and kept slipping back into an overpowering chaos.

“His eyes!” Fodot hissed. “Look at his eyes now!”

The eyes that had previously been wholly marble white were now completely riddled with static, and it shifted and reformed in sync with the static on the computer screen. Leszno had ceased to blink and it was no mere reflection that we saw there, but an occupying force.

“I read somewhere once,” said Kartaly, “of a narcoleptic whose eyelids were pulled back as he slept and whose dreams could be seen passing across his pupils, one after the other.”

Miss Krug crossed herself.

“Enough! Enough!” Popov shrieked. He took hold of Leszno by the shoulder and hurled him off the chair with great force. As the charred man lay sprawled on the carpet, he grabbed the heavy fire extinguisher from its socket on the nearby wall and held it aloft, ready to smash it down on Leszno’s skull.

“Kill it! Kill the thing!” Kartaly cried.

Popov quickly looked at each of us in turn, and only Miss Krug turned away.

Leszno tried to regain his position on the chair, but Popov kicked him back onto the floor. And then he hammered the base of the heavy fire extinguisher cylinder into the upturned face again and again, with a frenzy born of pure adrenaline and terror. After several blows the skull of his victim was completely crushed. And what we saw thereafter only filled us all with a greater sense of horror, for the gore-splattered mass of brain tissue was suffused with electronic radiance, and the stream of Leszno’s dark red lifeblood that pooled across the floor pulsed with individual bubbles of black and white static.

Popov staggered backwards, dropping the fire extinguisher as if it were red hot, and leant against a desk for support. A deadly silence

enveloped us all, leaving us to our own dark thoughts, and the only sound was that of the rampaging wind of the snowstorm outside as it continued to batter against the Bloy Building.

Whoever had gone into the lift since the blizzard struck, I reasoned, had been horribly transformed during the journey. Certainly the lift was the key to the whole mystery. Both Leszno and Olek had gone down into depths of the structure that did not previously exist. In order to discover the nature of the secret that was now spawning horror all around us, it was necessary to find out what was down there in the hidden subterranean levels. But there was no way of doing so without, presumably, becoming a burnt, insane fiend.

It was madness, but there was no other way to know.

I picked up the fire extinguisher that Popov had dropped and wiped off the blood from its base with my handkerchief. I then removed the locking pin, and tested it by pressing down momentarily on the handle. A short white burst of freezing carbon dioxide scattered some papers lying on a nearby desk.

“What the hell are you doing?” Kartaly asked.

“I’m going down in the lift. What’s down there is the key to all that’s happening,” I said, “and this extinguisher may just prevent me from ending up like Olek and Leszno.”

“Don’t be a bloody fool,” Popov said. “That won’t protect you! They weren’t burnt by any *natural* fire. Their clothes were untouched. There’s no scorching that I could see inside the lift cage. You go down in that lift and you’ll end up exactly like them.”

“I’m going with him,” Fodot blurted out. “Perhaps two of us will have a better shot than just one of finding out exactly what this is all about.”

“I’d rather take my chances out in the blizzard,” Kartaly said, shaking his head.

Miss Krug said nothing, and was standing at one of the huge windows, looking out at the storm as if hypnotised.

“Well, that’s that settled,” I murmured. “Come on, Fodot, let’s go.”

The two of us went into the corridor and I pushed the call button for the lift. We watched the indicator board charting the ascent from the lower floors, one by one.

Popov stuck his head outside the office doorway into the corridor.

“Come back! Don’t chance it!” he cried.

The lift arrived, and the doors opened with a ping. There was nothing inside.

Fodot hesitated for a moment, looking back over his shoulder at Popov who was beckoning him to return to the office.

I stepped inside the lift cage and put the fire extinguisher down on the floor. My hand hesitated over the numbers on the control board.

“Are you coming, Fodot?” I asked him. “You don’t have to. It’s up to you.”

“I’m coming,” he replied, stepping in alongside me.

“Let’s try the lowest button, then.” I pushed the one marked “B” for basement.

The doors slid shut with another metallic ping and we began our descent.

*

We watched the floors passing by through the little glass windows on both sections of the lift doors. The panel above the door frame flashed up each number in turn as the lift cage slid smoothly downwards in the shaft. Then we reached the ground floor and the last stop that was marked, the basement.

The lift came to a halt, but the doors did not open. I pressed the “B” button one more time, but nothing happened. Perhaps the trip switch that set off the door mechanism on this level was jammed, I thought.

“Well,” I said to Fodot, shrugging my shoulders, “that’s that. We might as well return to the others.”

He nodded, and, just as my hand sought the number seventeen on the control panel, all the lights on it went dead.

With a shudder, and then a jerk, the lift began to move again, continuing its descent.

“Here we go,” I said. “Who knows what we’re in for.”

Fodot grinned bravely but there was a nervous twitch at the corner of his mouth.

I peered through one of the little glass windows of the lift cage, but saw no sign of any other floors passing by. It appeared that we were in a sheer vertical shaft with nothing but solid concrete all around.

“I wonder how deep this thing can go,” I murmured. “Surely there has to be a limit?”

“I don’t know,” said Fodot. “Perhaps it depends on the length of the supporting cables.”

It seemed a sensible deduction.

After several more minutes had elapsed, I tried pushing the buttons on the control panel at random. They were still useless. The panel above the door frame told us nothing.

“I can’t see how a cable long enough to reach all the way down here could be attached to the lift. It would weigh tons and the coils would take up a gigantic amount of roof space.”

“Maybe we switched onto some sort of traction rails built into the sides of the shaft,” Fodot mused, “straight after reaching the basement.”

I recalled the jarring interruption the lift experienced when reaching the basement level and agreed with his theory. It fitted what facts we had.

He pulled out a pack of cigarettes from his jacket pocket and stuck one in his mouth.

“You?” he asked.

I wondered if we’d both suffocate in the confined space, but took one anyway, and he lit it for me. Both of us sat down and puffed away in silence, watching the smoke curling around the confines of the enclosed space, before disappearing through the slim gaps between the doors, drawn out by the upward draught caused by our passage through the shaft.

Down and down we went, further and further.

An hour passed. Then maybe two.

All the while Fodot and I made desultory conversation, talking of our pasts, and he particularly of a sweetheart. But it was a strange, unnatural dialogue, for we were constantly on edge, aware that, at any moment, the lift might halt, the doors open, and an unknown horror fall upon us.

“Duval,” Fodot said, finally expressing the thought that had, too, been preying on my mind for some time, “you do realise that we must now be over ten miles below ground?”

I was about to answer, when abruptly the fluorescent overhead lights in the ceiling went out and we were engulfed by utter blackness.

At the same instant the lift came to a shuddering stop.

I fumbled for the fire extinguisher I’d placed close at hand, and leant on it as I scrambled to my feet.

“Quickly, Fodot,” I said in the darkness, “get behind me!”

I heard the doors open with a ping, and we were instantly engulfed by an incoming wall of electronic static, which poured into the confines of the lift cage like a huge wave. It carried with it an overpowering stench of burning flesh. My whole body tingled with the shock, and I could scarcely see at all, my senses overwhelmed by the radiance. My eyes felt as if they were on fire and would explode in their sockets.

I collapsed into a corner of the lift cage, crouched foetal, and then heard Fodot's screams as he was drawn over the threshold by the pull of the withdrawing static as it seeped back into the greater void. There was another ping, the doors slid shut, and the lights flashed back on.

I was entirely alone, and the lift was slowly ascending the shaft. Despite my frantic efforts the buttons on the control panel still refused to work and I could not stop its progress.

There was no trace remaining of my fellow passenger except for a half empty, crumpled pack of smokes and some cigarette butts littering the floor.

*

Hours later I arrived back at the seventeenth floor. I staggered out of the lift to see Popov leaning casually against the door frame of the office.

"Changed your mind, eh?" he said with an offensive wink.

Quite what he meant by this, I had no idea, except that he must have been making a joke in bad taste at my expense.

He was gazing over my shoulder, as if waiting for poor Fodot to emerge in my wake. Finally he brushed past me and saw into the empty lift cage for himself before the doors slid shut.

"Where is he, eh? Where's young Fodot?" Popov asked, looking genuinely surprised. By now, the others had joined him in the corridor, looking as puzzled as him.

"Gone. Absorbed. Hours and hours ago. My God." I managed to croak out the words.

"Hours? What are you talking about? You've been in the lift for only a couple of minutes!" Popov replied, looking to Miss Krug and Kartaly for confirmation. They both nodded solemnly, as they helped me into the office and sat me down in a chair.

"He's right, Duval," Kartaly said, "you left us to go to the lower floors less than five minutes ago."

I glanced at my watch. There was a difference of over four hours between it and the time shown by the clock that hung on the wall. Unable to fathom the anomaly, I gratefully accepted the cup of hot coffee laced with sugar that Miss Krug brought me. I sipped at it, and noticed that my hands were trembling. My gaze roved about the room and I saw that the body of Leszno had been covered with his own coat, blotting out the sight of his crushed head and the crazy bloodstain. I shivered involuntarily.

"Well," Popov said, standing over me, his brow furrowed, "what happened to the kid? Absorbed, you said. What does that mean?"

"Can't you see he's not well?" Miss Krug chimed in. "Won't you leave him alone until he's got his strength back?"

"I recall reading once about a famous case in Versailles," Kartaly began to explain, apparently thinking out loud to himself, "of two ladies who found themselves transported into an earlier century . . . "

"Will you please shut up talking nonsense!" Popov screamed at him.

Kartaly's fists clenched and he was on the verge of assailing Popov when we all heard the ping of the lift doors opening in the corridor outside.

Then Fodot staggered into the office.

I dropped the coffee cup.

He was just like Olek and Leszno.

White, blank eyes and blackened, burnt flesh.

Without seeming to notice our presence, Fodot went to the nearest computer terminal, switched it on, and began his attempts to manipulate the static on the screen by tapping at the keyboard.

His eyes rapidly began to take on the appearance of the electrical interference.

"For God's sake," Kartaly blurted out, breaking the spell the sight exerted over us all, "let's get out of here!"

Now no one protested, and even I, despite my weakened condition, acquiesced. I was sick to my soul of it all, and there seemed no alternative to Kartaly's suggestion. To remain in the building would entail certain madness or death. We filed out of the office, making for the stairs, in order to take our chances on foot in the still-raging blizzard outside. I wondered if Olek was still banging his hand against the glass of the lobby door.

*

On the way down, we heard movement through all the doors connected to the other storeys, as if heavy objects were being shifted by an army of

unknown visitors who could only have travelled up from the depths. We heard, too, the pinging sound of the lift. It seemed to be much in use, although we did not stop to investigate. Certainly Fodot had appeared to be engrossed when we had quit the seventeenth floor office, so it was unlikely to be him travelling up and down the shaft. It had to be more of the unknown visitors arriving. In any case, our descent was undertaken in complete silence, for we feared alerting those strangers to our presence.

We reached the ground floor and Kartaly cautiously opened the door to the lobby.

“There are half a dozen burnt men with white eyes out there, blocking the exit,” he said.

“Do you recognise them? Did they work here?” I said in a low voice.

“Hard to tell. Their features are pretty ravaged, but I don’t think so,” he replied.

I peered over his shoulder.

Would they try and stop us or be indifferent to our attempts to leave?

Popov didn’t wait for the answer, but pushed past the both of us, his great bulk rushing across the lobby towards the glass exit doors, trying to take them by surprise. In doing so, he had not only revealed his presence to them, but also our own.

He didn’t make it very far. Two of the things bore down on him, their lips pulled back in hideous grimaces, while the others sluggishly began to approach us. I just had time to glimpse the first two dragging Popov towards the lift door, and briefly caught sight of the mangled remains of Olek on his knees, trying to assist the assailants by thumping the call button with the stump of his left hand.

Kartaly slammed the lobby door shut. Miss Krug tugged at my arm.

“There’s a fire door just around the corner, remember?” she said.

We set off for it, the possibility of escape not yet remote.

Our hopes were dashed, however, when we rounded the corner to discover another three of the things stationed at that exit too. They had completely taken over the building.

Miss Krug’s mind snapped. She began laughing manically, backed up against the nearest wall, and then slid down it, refusing to budge despite the advancing forms of the three burnt men with white eyes.

“Let’s go,” Kartaly cried, “before it’s too late.”

“We can’t leave her here!” I shouted back.

“No choice! She’s cracked up! She’s already gone, man!”

He pulled me away, and I didn’t look back.

We gained the stairs and hurtled up them. The shuffling sounds of our pursuers were not far behind.

“There’s another way to get out,” Kartaly said. “We smash one of the first floor office windows and jump for it. It’ll be a short drop.”

“How do you know the first floor isn’t crawling with them?” I replied.

*

We entered cautiously. The first floor corridor was deserted, and I managed to jam shut the access door behind us by pushing a table right up underneath the handle. I was just in time, for no sooner had I done so than heavy blows began to rain down on the other side.

Kartaly was in the doorway to the office. I came up alongside him.

Inside was a complex range of machines, the likes of which I had never before seen. It looked as if someone had turned a huge series of mainframe computers and televisions inside out and mixed them up with engine spare parts from a motor vehicle repair shop. Snaking tubes and wires ran from the ceiling to the floor, and, amidst all the chaos, several of the burnt corpses manned work stations. A few were pulling levers or making adjustments to wiring, but the majority were in front of static-ridden display screens, tapping away in the same bizarre fashion at their keyboards as we had previously seen with Leszno and Fodot. Like them, their eyes positively glowed with living static interference.

The lift doors pinged on this floor and three more operatives advanced, carrying strange equipment up from the depths below. They took no notice of us, but I shook Kartaly by the shoulder. The jammed door to the first floor was giving way. The burnt men who had pursued us would be breaking through any second.

Kartaly sprang into action. He crossed the floor of the office, picked up a heavy engine part that was lying around and lifted it over his head. He stood directly in front of the wall window on this storey, ready to hurl it through the plate glass.

A couple of the burnt men turned their heads in his direction, distracted momentarily from their tasks.

Kartaly dropped the engine part and sank to his knees, burying his head in his hands. Our pursuers were upon us and dragged us towards the

lift. I did not resist them. There was no point in struggling anymore.

For outside, instead of the blizzard that had been raging around the Bloy Building, there now rolled a seething ocean of living static, stretching into the distance as far as the eye could see.

And it was only when I returned to the surface and saw it through new eyes that I appreciated its incomparable beauty.

My Heretical Existence

I had long dwelt in that European metropolis that is known as the city of exiles, and it is appropriately named, but, hidden away amidst its deepest recesses, there is also a continuity amongst certain of its inhabitants. There are entire dynasties who have never left the metropolis, and whose historical authenticity is made apparent to one another only through the exchanges of secret signs handed down through the centuries. They are few in number, it is true, but their existence is certain. I have stumbled across the proof, although you will find no confirmation in any of the works of anthropology that fill the shelves of university libraries.

This is a subject upon which I am the sole authority; for no one else has taken any interest in it. Survivals of far-off tribes in Asia or Africa will produce fascination amongst the general run of anthropologists, but here, under their noses, another tribe exists; one secret, unregarded, and undiscoverable by anyone who had not travelled across the vast expanse of the city's grey endless streets *in search of heretical existences*.

It was in a tavern in an obscure quarter of the capital that I first confirmed the existence of one such dynasty. I might have discovered it by accident, had I lived in that area, but I did not, and several years of haunting drinking holes in the city had instead brought it to my attention; and even then only via a chance remark I overheard.

Certain families, it seemed, had dwelt in this quarter for generation after generation, never leaving, and never having intermarried with outsiders: their entire existence consisted of separation. It was a region of great antiquity, merely two streets last recorded in the nineteenth century, overlooked by developers and having escaped all the ravages of both world wars. An ancient rusty gate in a brick archway between a series of sunken back-gardens marked its entrance, and a lone inn of immense age stood at the intersection of the two streets.

Only in the anonymity of a vast and ancient city could such a bizarre district have persisted virtually unnoticed down the centuries, an urban survival like a single, monstrously strange mushroom in a damp, half-forgotten cellar.

“No one, other than the locals, goes to Sartor Street,” I overheard someone say a few minutes shy of closing time in a pub on one of the main thoroughfares of the metropolis. “My father made the mistake of going there once, and he never went back.”

The speaker was in his cups, and burbled out the remark over the top of a foaming tankard of ale. He seemed alarmed by his candour, and left immediately after draining his drink to the dregs.

I made a note in pencil on a slip of paper, though later found no current reference to the street. Nevertheless my curiosity was piqued. A street *did* exist with that name, but it had been a dead end, was pulled down decades ago and was surrounded on my city map by a series of yellow blanks, apparently leading nowhere.

Much later I sought out the inn just after midnight, at the culmination of an evening’s drinking, when it seemed to me that the legend I had heard might start into life as a consequence of my disordered imagination. I had long been subject to a forlorn passion for a beautiful and much younger woman named Adela who frequented the place, and, though I knew the infatuation to be hopeless, I often spent evenings slowly drinking alone whilst weaving romantic fantasies that were never to be acted upon. Doubtless it was her very unattainability and the lack of affectation often found in the young that so attracted me; since what little conversation we had actually exchanged showed an insurmountable gulf between our interior lives, quite apart from the disparity in age. But it amused me to think that I was in love with her.

The hostelry in which she drank, and where I began my search, was, I recalled, supposedly only a short, albeit cryptic, distance from the spot where the antique street was located. Once the pub had shut its doors against the night, and the *belle jeune fille sans merci* exited with one of the young men who often hung around and who openly courted her attentions, I struck off into the streets in an indeterminate direction, not remembering exactly which way I was meant to go.

Perhaps, I *speculated* at the time, this was the only way for outsiders to gain entry into that particular area of Terra Incognita, with no admittance for the sober.

I had wandered through a maze of spacious and well-tended public gardens, and then a series of untended, private, sunken gardens located

somewhere behind the more general run of neglected and half-abandoned streets.

Well, I soon found myself, without being able to recall exactly how, at the rusty gates within a brick archway. I gripped a single bar of the frame, pushed, and one-half of the trellis swung open with a metallic groan. I traversed a passage of dripping shadows and then found myself at an intersection of two unlit streets that might have had existence in the modern age only in a labyrinth of ancient memory.

The sound of chatter and laughter spilled out onto the thoroughfare, and, turning towards the noise, I soon found myself in sight of a tavern. It was of ancient aspect and looked to have stood unchanged on the same spot for a period of indefinite years. I was extremely familiar with some of the older, still-standing taverns and bars of the city, though my visits to them had been infrequent.

This particular hostelry had a faded wooden sign suspended from an iron frame that projected above the bowed front window announcing it as “Under the Sign of the Hourglass Stilled”.

A low doorway admitted entrance to the place, the two worm-eaten panels within thrown open like a vertical maw. I could see, by the flickering play of light and shadow in the space immediately past the entrance, that candlelight provided the tavern’s source of illumination. I heard the muffled sound of conversation, before passing into its confines.

In crossing that threshold, I went further back into antiquity. I assumed at first that I had stumbled into someone’s elaborate jest; such was the confusing sight that confronted me. But, as the clientele turned, baffled amusement became stark terror.

I could hear the creak of wooden sinews, the flexing of wooden muscles and the grinding of wooden teeth. Their faces were painted garishly in a motley attempt to convey the human, but, oh, the deadly lifelessness of their expressions! Their glass eyes were without lustre, like grey flowers.

Stifling a terrified cry, I made to turn back the way I had come, but, before I could do so, was seized by another of the things that had crept up behind me. Its grip was vice-like, and I was borne towards a table and forced to sit. The others then proceeded to crowd around me, in motions spasmodic and half-coordinated, utilising limbs that mimicked those of man but which had not been designed for movement at all.

Cold fingers were at my throat, my mouth and my eyes, probing the living tissue.

I cried out, and there came by way of response a horrible parody of that cry from all of the things assembled, a distorted creaking of wooden lips and the clattering of wooden tongues.

Suddenly, the figures all drew back, making way for the advance of a female mannequin. She tottered forward in ungainly fashion, and, to my horror, I saw that it was a simulacrum of Adela.

Her white-painted face, like porcelain, pressed close to my own, her glass-dead eyes stared without emotion, the red slash of her mouth fixed itself to my own. I felt vitality draining out of me, and could struggle against her embrace only feebly. There was a sensation as of drowning in unfathomable depths, and I lost consciousness.

*

When I finally awoke it was to find myself in hospital. The doctors advised me that I was paralysed, and my only means of communication with others was via a low whisper from the back of my throat. I was told that there is no such place as “Sartor Street” and that the nerve damage to my spine and limbs was caused as the consequence of a fall whilst in a state of extreme inebriation. One of the nurses has agreed to take down this account in writing.

Her name is Adela.

She promises me that there is a perichoresis, wherein two worlds overlap, and that the agony I endure is but a process of transformation. She says that the stiffening of my limbs is merely a means to prepare me for that new mode of heretical existence whither I am rapidly departing.

In Eternity—Two Lines Intersect

A week after my release, I finally found accommodation. It had not been easy, and I had viewed several flats which, though suitable, were beyond my limited financial resources. The doctors had advised me that my re-integration into society should be gradual and unhurried, for it was likely to be still some time before my nerves began to fully recover and I could once again feel comfortable interacting with strangers. They gave me pills to assist with the anxiety attacks to which I was subject, and assigned me a psychotherapist whom I was to visit on a weekly basis.

The flat was located on the top floor of one of a row of three-storey buildings set slightly back on a busy trunk road in the north of the city. The hum of its passing traffic produced a constant background noise. The structures dated back to the 1890s, and must once have formed a series of houses owned by tradesmen, for the frontages of single-storey shops abutted onto the outside pavement in front of the houses. All had been divided into flats during the passing of many years. They were uniform, nondescript, dreary and depressing, like a set of ill-fitting dentures.

The particular flat into which I was to move my few belongings had been vacated some weeks previously, its former tenant having apparently quit the place giving no notice. The rent had been several months in arrears and when the owner came to serve an eviction notice he found no sign of the property having been recently occupied. The gas, telephone and electricity supplies had all been cut off due to non-payment. There were a few tins of foodstuffs remaining in the makeshift larder, but the refrigerator was empty.

There was little chance of his having committed suicide; certainly no body fitting his description had turned up and there was no evidence of foul play by a third party. The owner told me it was his personal opinion that the former occupier must have fled the country. This made sense since he had left all of his personal belongings behind, such as his clothes, his small library of books, furnishings etc. Naturally, it would normally be highly disconcerting to have moved into a place wherein all the contents were a reminder of the tastes and presence of a man no longer there, but, in my case, it proved a welcome distraction. I had virtually no possessions of my

own and advised the landlord to leave the flat as it was, and not to clear it out, since I had no qualms about occupancy in its current state. He made no objection. There could be little profit to be made from selling off the remnants the former tenant had left behind, unless one specialised in the secondhand trade.

Therefore, with my own past consisting of events painful for me to recall, and with scant prospect of any meaningful future, I slipped instead into the past of another man, one who had vacated his own place in the universe.

I passed my days looking for a job, but found the stigma of long absence from regular employment to be a near-insurmountable barrier. Eventually, I managed to secure a part-time position stacking shelves in a local supermarket, where I worked alongside a group of people considerably younger than myself. It was robotic and intellectually undemanding labour, and my imagination battened on the life of the man whose past existence I now partially occupied.

*

In the evenings, when I returned from my employment, I would sit gazing out of the window and read one of the books left behind or else listen to *his* radio set. I had not adjusted the frequency dial, so presumably it was tuned into the station he too would have last heard. He had not owned a television set.

The immediate view out of the window was uninspiring. Below, an endless stream of traffic passed along the dual carriageway. When it rained, which was often, there was a hissing sound as the vehicles' rubber tyres gripped the tarmac, and the wet surface reflected back the sodium-orange haze cast by the lofty streetlights.

On the opposite side of the trunk road there loomed a Neo-Gothic church. Its dusty and cracked windows were invariably dark and there were no signs of human occupancy. It appeared services of religious worship had been abandoned there some considerable time before.

In the expanse behind this building there arose a massive hill covered with yew, silver birch, sycamore, elder, oak and hornbeam trees. It was a survival of immemorial woodland that had somehow escaped the encroachments of urban development that had sprung up all around it. My attention often turned to this reminder of the past when I sat at the open window, to watch the enormous mass of trees swaying in the wind, and hear

the rustle of innumerable leaves—as if the trees were whispering secrets to one another in the night.

I had not been subject to such strange ideas before, and could only put them down to the influence of the books I had been reading, drawn from the small library of the former tenant. They were books of myths and legends, chronicles of ancient history and a series of pamphlets relating to rural spaces that still existed within the metropolis.

From one of them I learnt the name of the former tenant, for he had scribbled his signature in pencil on the flyleaf—Ambrose Crashaw—and he had dated it a half a decade ago.

*

And then came the day when I began to don his clothes. I had brought few of my own with me, and the large wardrobe in the flat contained a series of suits and shirts. None were brand new but all were presentable enough, with only occasional marks of fraying at the cuffs or slight wearing at the elbows or knees. They fitted me perfectly, as if I had worn them myself for years. About them there lingered some faint aroma of incense, or even of wild roses.

In addition to these items, I discovered, in a smaller closet, a navy blue felt trilby hat, and several pairs of brown and black Oxford brogue shoes. They, too, all fitted me perfectly.

I was so pleased with my new apparel that I discarded my old clothes. I put all of the fashionable jeans, t-shirts and denim jackets I formerly wore into bin liners and dumped them on the doorstep of a nearby junk shop.

When I went to work at the supermarket, wearing my new apparel, my colleagues regarded me with scarcely concealed amusement. One of them told me I was dressing like an old man, and my supervisor seemed actually put out by my appearance, as if I had chosen to dress in a manner injurious to his own authority, for I eschewed the employee uniform I was supposed to wear. Only management in the company wore shirt and tie, he explained, quietly yet firmly to me, after I had been summoned to his office. I am afraid that a scene resulted, since I had not yet worked more than a week of my probationary period. He decided that, because I felt I could not adhere to company guidelines (in so basic a matter as the dress code), I should seek alternative employment immediately.

I returned to my flat and sat around during the afternoon wondering what I was to do. Provided I was able to live frugally, I calculated that my money would last for another month. At the end of that period, I would either have to find another job or else apply to the state for welfare support.

Then again, it was possible that, before that fateful time arrived, I would have entirely transposed myself into the life of Ambrose Crashaw and such considerations would be superfluous anyway. As the afternoon passed into evening, I was roused into a fit of speculation, and began to see a strange connection linking the books that formed his library. Some of them contained his pencil notes in the page margins, and these insights into his thought processes took possession of my mind.

And when finally I put the books away, and turned on the radio set, I found that it must have been broken, for the faint signal drifted aimlessly back and forth between channels, moving across frequencies harbouring ghostly voices speaking in English, Flemish, Spanish, German and French —as if all the mighty dead of Europe were echoing the strange sentences that Crashaw had added to the margins of his books. I sat listening to the noise for an hour or more, and only towards the end of that period did I notice the gradual transformation that was taking place—for the voices and the static I heard slowly blended into and were then replaced entirely by the sound of the leafy whispering of a vast multitude of trees.

Shaken by the occurrence, and doubting my own senses, I flung open the window and leant out into the night air. In the distance, the woodland hill was alive in the wind, its vast mass of swaying branches and leaves all bathed in moonlight, with an aureole of silver at its summit, and it seemed the hill formed one of the primal sources of the unearthly sound that issued from the radio set like an echo.

And I thought how glorious it would be if the natural world, instead of men, had recourse to communication via machines, and if it finally occupied all of the artificial constructs of humankind, one by one, for its own purposes. If man’s dominion were over, weeds would overrun the network of roads and railways within a few months, ivy and vines would begin to strangle the tower blocks and skyscrapers, and all computers would be riddled with lichen, producing only spores.

Whole cities would be reclaimed by nature after a few years, leaving only ruins, as lost and vainglorious as those of earlier civilisations such as

the Incas of the Andes, the Toltecs of northern Meso-America or the Mayans of the Yucatan Peninsula.

But some few men and women would linger on and tell tales by firelight of the horrors they had experienced before the newborn days of secret wonder had returned, back when they had looked grimly to the skies for stars but seen only the glare of electric lights blotting them out, when their souls sought for the sacred mystery and they were given instead the gruel of materialism, when ancient wisdom was drowned out by self-referential ideologies, when eternal truth was a matter thought fit to be decided by vote, when science ceased to be held to account for its part in the flaring of mushroom clouds, in gas chambers, in lobotomies, in pollution and the rape of natural resources, and when the value of a man was judged by his utility as a cog in the societal money-trading machine.

*

I believe that this alteration regarding my view of the world opened the door to another stage of initiation into Mystery. Whereas previously I had regarded the red-brick church opposite my dwelling as nothing more than a shell, now I began to suspect it harboured some secret whose profundity had been denied to me before now. Crashaw had written in his marginal notes of seeing a cup hidden in a secret church away from commonplace men, scrawling a series of stream-of-consciousness sentences in his notebook entitled *Meditations on the Great Wen*.

Crashaw had dwelt on the interior aspect of the Graal, and had come to believe that it only manifested itself when the beholder was infused by inner vision, in a spiritual reality transcending any material and historical survival. The Graal was the essence of the Holy Spirit and might take unto itself an avatar of the basest type—of a common vessel wrought in cracked wood—and its wonders would be apparent only to those who gazed upon it with eyes cleansed by the fire of divine imagination.

I cannot recall exactly at what stage it was that I first glimpsed the fantastic glow from one of the upper windows of the Neo-Gothic church, but I know that it was during a sunset of magnificent splendour, when the sky was aflame with crimson, purple and red hues, like a canvas by Turner, and the streets around me were suffused with an apocalyptic radiance, as if the very souls that dwelt therein were reflecting the luminance of their ultimate source. It was as the light of the sunset began to dim and the shadows of evening took hold that I saw clearly the glow gaining in

strength. Like a beacon it blazed, in an iridescent mixture of unearthly hues, intensifying by the minute, as the intolerably beautiful colours streamed outwards from the hollow of a wooden cup of no especial design. I thought of the church's stained glass window having been kindled into life, and of the sacred vision that no man might gaze upon and long remain of this world.

*

My dreams began to be affected. Previously when I slept I could scarcely remember them, and, even when I did so, they were merely a disordered repetition of commonplace events. But now they took on a fabulous character and I could recall them in vivid detail upon awakening. Moreover, they had none of the hallucinatory quality we associate with dreams but seemed just as real when I experienced them as seem the events of waking life. And yet, for all their clarity, they differed profoundly from this type of waking consciousness. Time had ceased to exist and my perceptions formed part of an indeterminate totality rather than part of a sequential process.

Imagine, if you will, that a man's life is a hall of mirrors—reflecting all the states of consciousness, all memories, all hopes and dreams, and all of the thoughts one ever experiences.

And as night followed night, and dream followed dream, I became aware that my own reflection was missing. In this maze of intolerable magnitude, wherein not only the lives of all other men were housed, living and dead across thousands of centuries, but also the records of whole civilisations that have risen and fallen, the record of our own world, and even the stupendous gulfs beyond, nowhere was there to be found a glimpse of my own being.

My brain revolted at the scope of such visions, and my recollection of them afterwards was fragmentary and disjointed, as if the organ itself was not capable of assimilating all the information to which it was exposed, as if I had partaken of the dreams of God.

And, when I awoke after these dreams, there were physical manifestations connected with them. At first these consisted of headaches, of a dizzying confusion, a dry mouth or else a sense of exhaustion. But they soon took on a stranger character, until I awoke with bruises, cuts or burns. Of course I initially put these down to somnambulism, though I had never sleepwalked before. But then the manifestations became stranger still, and I awoke with objects strewn over the bedclothes. A few examples of these

were: flowers not native to this country; pages torn from books that I did not own and in languages I could not understand; a fob-watch a hundred years old but in such good condition it might have been purchased the day previously; a sepia photograph of a Roman amphitheatre; a seventeenth-century Knight chess piece carved from ivory; and a bizarre compass whose needle apparently pointed east, at least by reference only to the lettering on the circumference of its face.

*

After several nights of such phantasmagoria, I could sleep no more. My brain appeared to have taken refuge from the dreams by refusing to shut itself down. Insomnia took hold of me and I passed the nights in a daze, not mindful of time, noting the passing of the days only when sunlight gave way to darkness.

I would then sit for hours gazing at the upper window of the church, awaiting the first appearance of the glow from the mystical cup and being entranced by it thereafter. Its radiance streamed in celestial glory like the Aurora Borealis, reaching out from the hollow of the vessel into the night sky, and I marvelled as those who made their way past on the street below seemed not to see the incredible wonder.

Had then my vision been purged of the veil separating men from reality, while the rest of mankind stumbled blindly onwards in the common round of life? I knew that the dreams I had experienced had thrown open a gate to the fantastic, but had those dreams, now denied to me in sleeping, begun to shift into the waking world? The objects I had brought back from my sojourns in unconsciousness were quite real—even now they stood upon the mantelpiece, and at any moment I could pick them up. They did not fade into nothingness. What was dream and what reality?

Of course it had occurred to me before—why did I not simply cross the street, gain entrance to the church opposite and take possession of the cup? But, I thought, was any mortal man worthy to be entrusted with its keeping? And yet I reasoned to myself by way of an objection to that argument, what man alive had dreamed such dreams as I? What man had brought back with him from such dreams tokens of their being more than merely earthly dreams?

What had Ambrose Crashaw, the former occupant of these rooms, done? Had he seen what I had seen and taken the final decisive step in the process I myself was undergoing? Had he dreamed what I had dreamed and

decided to try and approach the cup? Perhaps he had been entirely subsumed into the Mystery, and this was the cause of his complete disappearance from this world.

And yet, what place had I in this world anyway? I had not played its game according to the rules and had been expelled. I was a mere absence.

The end came after the night I slept for the final time, when days of insomnia gave way to unconsciousness and I found myself again in the hall of mirrors. For therein I discovered the reflection of Ambrose Crashaw and all the secrets were laid bare. He and I were the same person, and it was from his amnesia that I had suffered.

And clutched in my hand were the preceding pages, memories or prophecies written down whilst I was still asleep, a transcript from the impressionistic book of my existence.

*

Later, I went out into the night, crossed the street, and gained entrance to the church. Within the dusty confines of its labyrinthine passageways, in an upper room, the cup awaited my presence. Its radiance was like a blossoming rose of flame. I held it aloft, went back the way I had come, and bore it out onto the street, marvelling as night became day, as if within my hands I carried the rising sun.

All along the street, doors opened and the inhabitants poured forth from out of their homes, their eyes full of tears and wonder. The nightmares from which they had suffered were wiped away, and their souls freed from their prison of modernity. They had recovered their real lives and supernal purpose, and cries of delight at the release from their former bondage rang out like the fanfare of an angelic host. They skipped and danced for joy, forming a procession, as I led the way up towards the wood on the hill, the cup borne on high like a beacon.

And in the fragrance of the hollow of the ancient wood, at the summit of the hill, we learnt the secret song that the trees sang and the healing cup was passed round to each who thirsted in turn, and all men drank deep and gladly from its infinitely illumined depths, and the holy ceremony was concluded in glory and splendour, for all sorrow passed away and the mighty race of men that had once fallen, long ago, was lifted back up into the magisterial peaks of the supreme kingdom on high.

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